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"I LOVE HIM—HE IS MY DOOM," SHE WAILED. "AND YET, HEAVEN PITY ME, I MUST GIVE MYSELF TO ANOTHER."

MARRIED IN HASTE;

Or, A Young Girl's Temptation.

BY RETT WINWOOD.

AUTHOR OF "WIFE OR WIDOW," "A MAN'S SIN," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SHADOW OF COMING EVENTS.

THIS is the advertisement she found staring at her like the eye of fate from the columns of a daily paper some one had left lying on one of the factory benches:

"NEXT OF KIN.—Should the heirs of the late Garrison Dreeme see this advertisement, they are requested to communicate immediately with the undersigned, from whom they will hear something to their advantage.
JONES & BROWN,
"25 Client street, New York."

The pretty young girl pushed the clustering curls of silken brown hair away from her forehead and stared at the notice in astonishment. What did it mean? She was Drusilla Dreeme, only child of the Garrison Dreeme mentioned in the advertisement. But she had been a poor, friendless waif since her father's death, five years before, and had not supposed there was

anybody in the world, aside from the Templetons with whom she lived, who felt an interest in her fate.

"Some rich relative may have died, and left me a fortune," she said to herself with a bitter laugh. "I am sure it would be very welcome."

Clang! clang! clang! went the harsh factory bill; the deafening din and ponderous revolutions of the machinery began again, and weary, haggard operatives came pouring into the huge building through every door.

No more time for dreams or idle speculations. Thrusting the paper into her pocket, Drusilla went quietly to her usual place, and the labors of the afternoon began. Never had the hours seemed to go by so laggingly. The stifling air, smelling of rancid oil and filled with dust and particles of flying lint, the perpetual din, the noisy revolutions of the spindles—how she hated them all! No wonder her thoughts dwelt eagerly and longingly upon the advertisement fate had thrown in her way.

"It was certainly intended for me," she said. "How thankful I shall be if it brings release from the drudgery of this hateful life!"

The girl at the next loom, a pale brunette, watched her curiously from time to time. Presently she spoke:

"A penny for your thoughts, Drusy. Are you dreaming of palaces, and marble halls?"

"Yes," was the quiet response.

The girl tossed her head, laughing half-scornfully.

"Dream on, then. It comforts and encourages one. But these black floors and discolored walls are as near the reality as you and I are likely to attain."

The long afternoon drew to a close. At last the blessed signal for release was sounded. Drusilla tied on her hat with trembling fingers, and hurried out of the close, stifling atmosphere with the mental prayer that she might never breathe it again.

Mrs. Templeton's humble cottage stood in a quiet side-street; not far away. It was a pretty place, scarcely larger than a humming-bird's nest. But it had a neat yard, planted with flowers, and a wilderness of vines and wild roses clambered over the tiny porch.

The plain little parlor held a single inmate—a pale, handsome young man with a high brow and a grave though singularly noble face, who sat at a table littered with papers, writing rapidly.

It was Ward Templeton, the son of the poor widow with whom Drusilla had found a home. By dint of superhuman exertions the young man had struggled through a college career, studied for a profession and within the past month hung out his shingle as attorney at law.

He found clients slow in coming, however, and in the mean while was struggling hard to support himself and mother by doing such copying as was to be procured from rival and more prosperous firms.

Drusilla's pretty face clouded over as she noticed how deeply the young man was engaged. She had come home tired, restless and nervous, full of speculation in regard to the advertisement. Ward Templeton was her lover; she wanted his sympathy and advice—to discuss the matter freely with him and obtain his assistance.

"Please lay aside your work for to-night, Ward," she said, "and give this one evening to me."

He looked up with a loving smile, but gravely shook his head.

"I wish it were possible, Drusy. But I promised to have these deeds copied before ten o'clock."

"Give me half an hour, at least. I have something to say to you."

He sighed.

"I have not a moment to spare. My employers must not be disappointed. Wait until to-morrow."

Drusilla Dreeme was scarcely herself that night. Instead of patiently submitting to the delay, she burst into a storm of petulant tears.

"It is always so. Your evenings are given to that eternal copying. You would rather disappoint me than your employers."

Ward gave her a surprised glance, his handsome face growing unutterably sad.

"Why, Drusy!" he exclaimed; "I never saw you like this before. You must be ill."

"So I am," she said. "Sick to death of this dreary, barren life so full of drudgery and pain, with not a single gleam of brightness to make it endurable! Would to Heaven I might get away from it all!"

The young man dropped his pen, and rising, stood beside her. Never before had he heard her give utterance to such feelings, and his dark, earnest eyes were full of pain.

"Are you tired of me, as well as of the life you lead, Drusy?" he asked, striving to be calm.

"I—I—don't know," she sobbed. "The future looks dark and hopeless. What have we to expect? It will require years for you to become established in your profession."

"I am working hard, Drusy—I am doing my best," he interrupted, a deep sadness in his voice. Then he drew back, gazing at her earnestly.

"This wearing night work is for your sake," he added. "I would work my fingers to the bone, and never complain; but, as you say, years of weary waiting lie before us. Drusilla, it was wrong to extort a promise from you. You are young, beautiful, full of life and ambition. You might do much better for yourself. It is not right that you should wear out the best years of your life waiting for me. I blame myself for not having thought of this before. I release you from your engagement."

At another time Drusilla would have laid her aching head upon his shoulder, and clinging to him with penitential tears, begged his forgiveness. But now a strange unrest fired her blood and beat at her rebellious heart.

"You are very kind," she said, with a scornful toss of her golden-brown head. "I feel it my duty to accept the liberty so generously given."

She would not even look at him again, but sweeping proudly past, ascended the stairs, and shut herself into her tiny chamber under the roof.

All inclination to show the advertisement to Ward had vanished. She threw herself upon the dainty white couch, crushing the newspaper in her hand, and sobbing as though her heart would break.

"He is cold and cruel," she told herself. "He has no sympathy with my dreams and longings. He thinks more of his future career than of mine."

After a moment's thought she added:

"I shall answer the advertisement, and say nothing to anybody. It may be of no consequence after all. It will be time enough to tell Ward and Mrs. Templeton when I know exactly what to expect."

The young man had gazed sorrowfully after Drusilla as she passed from his sight. "Poor child," he thought. "She is so beautiful—she deserves a better lot than has fallen to her portion. She would grace any station in life. No wonder she pines and beats her wings like a caged bird. God knows how tenderly I love her, but I will not selfishly stand in her way."

Entering the parlor a few moments later to summon her son to the simple repast she had prepared, Mrs. Templeton found him seated at the table, wielding his pen more industriously than ever. But some suspicious drops of moisture glistened on the parchment that lay before him.

"Drusilla has gone up-stairs, and declines to eat any supper," she said, giving the young man a searching look. "I hope you have done nothing to offend her, Ward?"

He raised his head with a smothered sigh.

"This humdrum life is wearing upon her, mother. She must leave the factory, and go away for awhile—have a complete change of scene."

"But how is it to be managed?" said Mrs. Templeton, helplessly. "Drusilla has laid nothing by out

of her own wages, and we are very poor, as you know."

"I shall work so much the harder," was the reply, given in a more cheerful tone.

CHAPTER II.

ANSWERING THE ADVERTISEMENT.

The next morning, as soon as Ward had departed for his up-town office, Drusilla attired herself in a neat walking suit, and took the train for New York.

She had no difficulty in finding the office of Jones & Brown. Both gentlemen happened to be in. A tall, dark, handsome man was just departing as she entered. He stood still a moment, and glanced furtively at the young girl, as though fascinated by her fair, flower-like face, ere going away.

Drusilla blushed and trembled, she knew not why. Gliding up to the nearest member of the firm—Mr. Brown—she laid the advertisement on the desk beside him.

"I am here to answer it," she said briefly.

The lawyer stared, an expression of amazement on his face.

"Bless me! How very singular. The gentleman who has just gone away is interested in the matter, and has requested us to repeat the notice in all the city papers. And so," looking at her narrowly, "you are Garrison Dreeme's daughter? That is what you wish me to understand?"

"Yes," Drusilla calmly replied, though her pulses were beating. "Of course I do not expect you to accept my unsupported statement. I bring with me my father's marriage-certificate—also the record of my own birth. Here they are."

The lawyer studied the papers attentively a moment, then glanced at his colleague.

"These are genuine, Mr. Jones," he said briefly. "Our advertisement has been answered sooner than was expected."

Then he studied the sweet, blushing face of the young girl, his own warming with sincere admiration.

"Have you brothers or sisters, Miss Dreeme?"

"No," an unconscious sadness in her fresh young voice. "I am alone in the world."

"Do you know who requested us to advertise, and why?"

"It must have been some one of poor papa's relatives?"

"Yes, his great-aunt, Mrs. Margaret Severne. She is a lonely old woman, without any children of her own, and resides, for the most part, at her country-seat, called Windymere, in northern New Jersey."

"I have heard papa speak of her," said Drusilla, her face lighting up with eagerness. "She is very rich and very eccentric?"

"Yes," smiled the lawyer. "My client is now well advanced in years, and wishes to choose an heir before she dies. Do not build up any hopes that may be disappointed," he added, hastily. "Mrs. Severne is very whimsical and tyrannical; it is impossible to tell beforehand what she will decide to do with her money. At the last moment she might conclude to leave it to strangers, or found a charitable institution."

"Am I to go to her?"

"Within a day or two—after I have had time to communicate with her. But it is at your own risk, please bear in mind. Though," he added gallantly, "I do not see how Mrs. Severne can help being pleased with you."

Some further conversation ensued, and after leaving her address, that the lawyer might know where to find her, Drusilla departed.

As she made her way through the dingy passage into the crowded thoroughfare, she was again confronted by the handsome stranger. This time he gazed at her even more earnestly and admiringly than before, and paused as if to speak; but finally raised his hat and passed on.

Drusilla blushed crimson, and dropped the sweeping lashes over her eyes. There had been nothing bold or impudent in the man's look, but his dark, handsome face and luring eyes haunted her all the way home.

Mrs. Templeton sat in the little parlor, busily sewing, but paused in her work, and looked up questioningly when the young girl entered.

"You did not go to the factory to-day, Drusilla?"

"No," with an irrepressible feeling of disgust. "Would she ever go there again? 'I had business in the city and took a holiday.'"

"I am glad of it," said Mrs. Templeton, heartily. "So much hard work, and so little amusement, is not good for one at your age. I hope you will manage to enjoy life better in future."

A wistful sigh followed the words. Drusilla did not even hear it. Full of happy thoughts, she stole up-stairs to her chamber, and sat there listening for her lover's step in the hall below.

"I will go to him at once, and tell him of my good fortune," she said to herself. "He will rejoice with me. Dear Ward, how I love him! I was almost angry with him last night, but now there is only tenderness in my heart."

The sun rolled its golden chariot down the western sky, twilight deepened and darkened, and the lamps had been lighted in the rooms below before the slow, weary footstep for which she waited crossed the porch and entered the cottage.

Drusilla lingered a few moments longer, then, her bright eyes dancing with joy, stole down to the cosy parlor.

Ward Templeton sat at the littered table, writing rapidly. The pile of papers to be copied was much larger than usual. He had brought home extra work to do in the hope of being able to send Drusilla away for rest and recreation.

Gliding up to him, her hand fell light as a snowflake upon his arm.

"Ward," she said coaxingly, "push those papers aside for to-night. I have been waiting for you for hours. Let us have a pleasant, social evening for once."

He gravely shook his head.

"Do you not see that I am busier than usual? I have not a moment to waste."

He did not intend to speak unkindly. Most gladly would he have given up his distasteful task, and devoted himself to the pretty pleader. But poverty is a stern taskmaster; for Drusilla's own sake he must remain firm.

A flush rose in the girl's beautiful face. Was her hunger for sympathy and love always to be answered like this? It was unendurable.

"So you count the moments wasted that are spent in my society?" she coldly demanded.

"You know I do not. But work must be attended to before anything else."

It was hard to answer thus—resisting the impulse to draw her down beside him and kiss her pouting lips and shining hair—but he did it.

"She will understand and be grateful when I am able to place in her hand the means necessary for a month's sojourn at the seaside or among the mountains," he said to himself.

But Drusilla, ignorant of the plans he was forming for her benefit, thought him cold, unsympathetic, even unkind.

"Very well," she said haughtily. "Since work is of such paramount importance, and your time so valuable, I shall know better than to trespass in future."

"Drusilla," he cried, rising hastily, pallid with emotion, "do not speak to me like that. Nothing in all the world is of so much consequence as your happiness."

"So I fancied once; but I no longer hold to the conviction."

"Let me explain, my darling—"

But she turned proudly away, refusing to bear a word.

"It does not matter in the least," she said. "Go back to your work. It possesses greater attractions for you than anything else. I can get along quite as well by myself; and I do not wish to hear anything you may have to say."

She threw open the long, French window, and stepped out into the moonlit garden. Ward Templeton stood gazing after her sorrowfully a moment, then resumed his seat at the table, his fine face distorted by an expression of pain.

Drusilla walked on a few steps, her heart beating rebelliously. She had been repulsed, and mentally decided to make no disclosure to Ward that night.

"He does not deserve my confidence," she thought; "perhaps does not even desire it."

At that moment a shadow fell in the moonlight at her feet, and looking up with a start, she beheld the handsome stranger standing close beside her.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE HANDS OF FATE.

"HUSH!" he said quickly, in a low, musical tone, before she could even cry out. "Do not be frightened. I am a friend and mean you no harm."

Drusilla's lips and cheeks grew white as death. She glanced eagerly toward the house. A rose trellis intervened between her and the open windows of the parlor, but a single appeal for help would reach Ward's ears and bring him to her assistance.

"What do you want?" she demanded, all her composure returning. "Why did you follow me home?"

"Are you Drusilla Dreeme?"

"That is my name."

"And mine is Lester Thornton."

He doffed his hat with a courtly bow. As the moonlight fell upon his dark, handsome face, revealing its princely beauty, Drusilla felt her heart thrill strangely, and no longer thought of being afraid.

"This is an intrusion," he went on, "but you will not be angry when you know more of me, and what induced me to seek you here. I saw the city lawyers after you left them to-day, and am indebted to their kindness for your address. I was struck by the chance glimpse I had of your face, and was thus led to make inquiries. Miss Dreeme, you are wonderfully like a portrait that hangs at this moment in the hall at Windymere."

Drusilla started.

"Have you been to Windymere?" she cried, feeling wholly at ease. "Do you know aunt Severne?"

"Yes," the stranger replied. "Mrs. Severne is distantly related to me. I have made her house my home for some time."

"Are you my cousin?"

"Oh, no," smiling, and displaying his milk-white teeth. "Mr. Severne, who is dead, was my great-uncle; and Mrs. Severne is your great-aunt. So you perceive we belong to two distinct races."

A brief silence ensued. Drusilla drew a long breath. How strange all the circumstances seemed—the advertisement so providentially found, the interview with the lawyers, and now the unexpected visit of this handsome stranger! It was like a romance.

"Mrs. Severne has been trying to find you for weeks," Lester Thornton resumed. "She had somehow heard that Garrison Dreeme was dead, and had left a daughter. She did not know whether there were other children or not. It did not matter to her. If you had brothers or sisters, they might starve for all her, she said; it was you she wanted, you alone. So she sent me and others to the inland city where your father once resided. I found his grave, but could obtain no clew to guide me to your present refuge. Mrs. Severne at once decided to advertise."

"Do you think I shall love my great-aunt?" Drusilla asked innocently.

He laughed aloud.

"It will be a miracle if you do. Nobody ever loved her yet. She is too hard and tyrannical to arouse affection. But, then, she is very rich. One can put up with anything for the sake of money. She is sure to scold, browbeat, and abuse you; but then, if you succeed in pleasing her, you will be a great heiress one of these days."

Drusilla thought of the hot, close factory, with its foul air, perpetual din, and the coarse, vulgar people she was compelled to meet there, and fancied she could endure anything after such an experience.

"Now I come to the real object of this visit," the man said, with a quick glance toward the house.

"At Windymere there must be no will save that of its arrogant mistress. She is not only tyrannical, but full of whims and caprices. In proof of this I have only to cite the fact that the lawyers had instructions if you were a married woman, to drop the matter entirely, and have nothing to do with you."

"What difference could it make?" Drusilla murmured, blushing crimson.

"All the difference in the world. Mrs. Severne has no fancy for an heiress whose future she is unable to mold to suit herself. If you are so unfortunate as to possess a sweetheart, even, she will compel you to give him up."

The stranger laughed merrily, as though he found the subject vastly amusing. But he saw, all the same, Drusilla's sudden start of dismay.

"Now for the word of advice I bring," he added, presently, in a more serious tone. "I know nothing of the friends you have made—wish to know nothing. But they must be dropped at the threshold of this new life. Drusilla Dreeme's associates during the dark hours of poverty can not be suitable friends for the rich Mrs. Severne's heiress."

"It would be cruel, ungrateful to turn my back upon those who have been so kind to me," she exclaimed.

"Nonsense. You have your own best interests to consult. Nothing should stand in the way. Thus far you have said nothing to your friends of the change in your prospects. Take my advice, and remain silent to the end."

"What do you mean?" she faltered, thrilling with terror in her surprise that he should be acquainted with the fact of her reticence.

He drew nearer, whispering the words close to her ear:

"I will tell you. Keep your secret, and when the time comes, steal away without saying one word to any one. It is the easiest way of shaking off those who might otherwise prove a millstone about your neck. The matter is easily accomplished. None of your present acquaintances would ever dream of looking for you at Windymere, or associating Mrs. Severne's heiress with plain Drusilla Dreeme. A word to the wise is sufficient."

He gazed steadily into her blanched face an instant, and with a meaning smile parting his full red lips, abruptly left her.

Drusilla lingered some time longer. She wanted time to compose herself after this singular interview with the handsome stranger.

Ward Templeton was still bending over his copying when Drusilla entered the house. One kind word, even a loving glance, and she would have flown to his side, confessing everything. But he did not speak, or even raise his eyes from his work.

"He does not care what becomes of me. He is wholly given up to ambitious dreams of the future," Drusilla thought bitterly; and she passed on to her own room.

Sleep was out of the question. Lester Thornton's words rung continually in her ears. If she went to Windymere with the expectation of winning her great-aunt's favor, Ward must be given up forever—the past few years be, as it were, blotted from her life.

"Why not?" she said to herself, choking sobs rising in her throat. "Ward prizes a grand career

much more than my love. I should only be a clog and a hindrance. He would forget me in a few weeks, and accomplish as much again without me."

Poor thing; she buried her face in her trembling hands, her slender frame quivering with the violence of her emotion. The despair of that passionate, undisciplined heart was pitiful to see. One tender, loving word would have wrought an entire revulsion in her feelings, but Ward was not there to speak it.

"Mr. Thornton is right," she thought. "I had better keep my secret, and steal away like a thief. Ward need not know what has become of me. He would never take the trouble to institute a search. Since he has so little love to give, he shall not stand between me and the splendid fortune I covet."

A sort of frenzy was upon her. Since she had decided to go, why should not the momentous step be taken immediately? It would be easier now, she fancied, than by and by.

With trembling, passionate hands she dressed herself and gathered together her few trinkets and keepsakes. Among the rest were a gold brooch and a pretty pearl ring Ward had given her. A few hot tears fell upon them as she hid them, with a few valuable papers, in the bosom of her dress.

At last she was ready to set out. A distant clock struck the hour of midnight. Drusilla turned toward the door. At that instant she heard her lover's slow, weary footsteps cross and recross the apartment below. He was still up, and at work.

Drusilla's heart smote her at the sound. With a pitiful sob she sunk on her knees beside the couch, and hid her face in the counterpane.

"How can I leave him?" she moaned. "After all, it may be for my sake he is so ambitious. Love is better than riches. I will not give him up!"

The night waned, and she still knelt there without sign, and motionless. Poor, undisciplined child! she had sobbed herself to sleep.

A roaring, crackling sound, and a suffocating smell awakened her. She started up, rubbing her sleep-laden eyes. All was bewilderment for a moment. Gasping for breath, she tottered into the middle of the room. At the same instant a sheet of vivid flame shot across the window. The house was on fire!

For one moment Drusilla stood motionless, as if petrified with horror, then she rushed to the door and flung it wide.

Volumes of thick, stifling smoke rolled up the stairway, instantly filling the apartment. It was like looking down into the yawning pit of hell. But her one last hope of life and safety lay in that direction.

"Ward! Ward!" she shrieked involuntarily.

Then she darted down the stairway. The air grew thicker and hotter as she advanced; it scorched her delicate flesh. The dense smoke rolled and circled about her. All was horror and confusion. She wildly stretched out her trembling hands.

"Ward, save me!"

Then she stood in the little parlor; it was empty now, but the flames were nearer—she could see the red tongues leap hissing along the wall and lick greedily at her garments, and sparks were falling all around her.

Suddenly her lover's voice, harsh and shrill with anguish, sounded in her ears.

"Drusy, where are you?"

"Here—here!"

She turned with a thrill of hope and rapture. Pride, anger, alienation, were all forgotten. For one instant she saw his face—the noble, handsome face she loved so well—turned toward her with an expression of horror and despair.

"Save me, Ward!"

Then a solid wall of flame shot up suddenly between them. The crashing of timbers and shivering of glass could be heard, and a groan of despair rose to Heaven from scores of human throats.

CHAPTER IV.

TEMPTATION.

BLINDED, bewildered, almost fainting with terror, Drusilla felt herself suddenly seized by a powerful arm and drawn backward from the horrible death so imminent a moment before.

She was dimly conscious of the ruddy glare of the burning building, the crackling of the flames, the hoarse murmur of excited voices—then a dark, handsome face was pressed close to her own a moment, and, with a long, shuddering sigh, she fainted outright.

When Drusilla's wandering senses struggled feebly back again she found herself in a close carriage, half-supported by Lester Thornton, who was eagerly chafing her temples and cold, white hands.

"You are better," he uttered, breathing a sigh of relief. "Thank God!"

Drusilla started up, quivering with anguish and horror.

"I remember," she cried. "The burning cottage, the suffocating atmosphere, the flickering tongues of flame, and Ward's white face gazing at me over that gulf of fire!"

A moan of despair drifted over the lovely, parted lips.

"Let me out," she implored. "Where are you taking me? He—Ward—will perish in the flames. It may be too late already. Let me fly to his rescue."

But the young man drew her down beside him.

"Reassure yourself, my friend," he said glibly. "Ward Templeton is in no danger—I lingered long enough to learn that much. He and his mother have found shelter ere this."

"But they need me. I must go to them instantly."

A half-amused gleam shone in the man's handsome eyes.

"You can be of no use. They will find plenty of friends in such an emergency. Do not waste an anxious thought upon those you have left behind."

Leaning over her quite tenderly he added:

"Listen to me, Drusilla. Your humble lover—for such I know him to have been—believes you are dead, that you perished in the flames. Others share the conviction. In the excitement that prevailed no one saw me rescue you and bear you away."

He paused, looking down at the blanched, beautiful face upon which the moonlight, streaming in at the carriage window, fell with a pearly glow.

"Fate has been singularly kind. Every link in the chain binding you to the past has been broken, and without conscious effort on your part. Do you realize the situation? You can enter the portals of the glorious life that awaits you without the least fear of annoyance from those who might, under other circumstances, have proven very troublesome?"

Drusilla felt her pulses start under the steady gaze of those dark, mesmeric eyes.

"It is well to know how to take advantage of circumstances," he went on, smiling. "I have shown myself your best friend. You were incapable of doing anything for yourself, and I acted for you. I hope you feel duly grateful. A splendid career awaits you. All the blessings and luxuries of life will be showered lavishly upon you. You have only to yield submissively to my guidance."

Drusilla was dazzled by the picture his words suggested. Wealth and ease looked very enticing after the hard, plodding life she had led.

The next moment a feeling of vague terror awakened in her heart. She knew so very little of the handsome stranger who had constituted himself her protector. Was it safe to trust him?

Drawing as far away as possible, she repeated a former question. "Where are you taking me?"

"To Windymere, to your great-aunt," he answered readily. "She warned me when I left not to come back without you. However, be prepared

for a cold welcome; Mrs. Severne will be secretly glad to see you all the same."

Drusilla made no reply. Leaning her head upon her hand, she sat thinking seriously and deeply.

Should she leave those who loved her, who had ever been so true and devoted, in this strange, secret fashion, severing her life suddenly and forever from theirs? Should she suffer this acquaintance of an hour to map out the uncertain future? Should pride, ambition and avarice gain the day—love, truth and rectitude be forgotten?

Then came the thought of Ward's coldness and indifference. "His grief would soon wear itself out," she said to herself bitterly. "I could never go back and humble myself to him again."

In the event that she should return, what explanation of her absence could be given? The simple truth would hardly be believed. She must relinquish all thought of inheriting Mrs. Severne's million—content herself with settling down to the old barren, humdrum life, more intolerable than ever now that this alienation had sprung up between her and Ward Templeton.

"Never," she cried aloud.

Lester Thornton heard, and looked at her with an approving smile, as though he divined all that had been passing in her thoughts.

"You have decided wisely," he said.

Stopping the carriage in one of the quiet streets where a light burned in a shop window—it was now almost daybreak—he entered, and purchased a shawl, hat, gloves and veil for Drusilla. Afterward he drove to the railway station.

The sun was shining brilliantly, shedding its golden glow upon the long, high blocks of brick and marble, and brown-stone palaces, when they finally reached the great metropolis. They went first to an up-town hotel, where a dainty breakfast was served; afterward the young man took his now silent companion to the office of the lawyers Drusilla had visited once already.

"We have received no word from Mrs. Severne," they said, glancing dubiously from the timid young girl to her handsome escort. "But we think you may safely venture to go to Windymere without."

It was not a long journey. The railway train was abandoned at a quiet country station, and Lester Thornton, smiling reassuringly, drew Drusilla's slender little hand under his arm.

"Windymere is half a mile away. No carriage has been sent as we are not expected. But we can easily walk the distance."

The girl's heart had been sinking for some time. Never in all her life had she felt so lonely and desolate. A painful flush suffused her cheeks as they stepped into the fragrant high-road, and she suddenly burst into tears.

Her companion gave her a perplexed look, not unmixed with annoyance.

"What is the matter, Drusilla? Are you dreading the encounter with Mrs. Severne? You need not. Her bark is much worse than her bite. She cannot help being pleased with one so innocent and beautiful."

"Oh, why did I come?" sobbed the homesick girl.

"Why did I not remain with those who loved me?"

"And give up the splendid fortune that awaits you?"

A sudden sparkle came into the velvety eyes. He had touched the right chord. No, she could not relinquish the bright hope that promised to make her future so delightful.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. SEVERNE.

DRUSILLA did not give a thought to the beautiful landscape upon which the sun, just past the zenith, was pouring its radiant, yellow flood.

She was vaguely conscious of swelling hills, clothed in verdure, green waving woodlands, flower-gemmed meadows, meandering streams, and a hazy distance

where the blue of the sky and the misty purple of the hills seemed to meet and kiss each other.

The dark, gray walls of a fine old mansion loomed up suddenly before her. Drusilla had never beheld anything so picturesque or half so imposing. Her thoughts were instantly carried back to descriptions of English baronial homes she had read.

"How grand!" she exclaimed, involuntarily.

The young man's eyes danced as they rested on her fresh, sweet face.

"Your future home," he whispered. "Is it not worth the sacrifice you have made? You need never leave it again."

A moment later Drusilla was ushered into the wide, marble-paved hall. She had only time to observe how lofty and spacious it was, with rows of family portraits hanging on either side, when a door opened and a middle-aged woman, dressed in plain black silk, appeared.

She gave a visible start, and was gazing bewilderedly from one to the other, when Lester Thornton spoke:

"This girl is the lost heiress for whom your mistress has been searching, Mrs. Merle. Show her to the guest-chamber, and I will inform Mrs. Severne that our quest has been successful."

The housekeeper—for such was Mrs. Merle's position at Windymere—bowed silently, and after one keen, searching look, bade the young girl follow her.

The chamber into which Drusilla was ushered, was a miracle of luxury and beauty. She felt her cheeks flush, and her heart beat as she looked around. Before she was half-done admiring its luxurious appointments—the soft velvet carpet that smothered the heaviest tread, the costly mahogany furniture, the rich drapings of satin and billowy lace—Mrs. Merle reappeared to take her to the drawing-room.

Drusilla did not even notice the splendors of this lower apartment. From the instant of crossing the threshold her whole attention was centered upon the woman who sat at the upper end, upon a raised seat of black velvet that had somehow the air of a throne.

A gray, wrinkled old woman of perhaps seventy, clad in a richly-embroidered, steel-colored brocade, a point-lace ruffle fastened about her neck with a diamond pin, and several costly rings upon her thin, yellow hands.

She lifted a gold-rimmed eye-glass as Drusilla entered; and through this medium the bright black eyes looked cold, cruel and crafty, as she coolly inspected her new-found relative.

"Humph!" she said, no feature of her harsh face relaxing in the least. "And so you are Garrison Dreeme's daughter?"

"Yes, aunt," Drusilla answered, in a trembling voice.

"Humph! I should never have thought it. I knew your father years ago, before he married. Quite a man of the world, polished and agreeable. But you—you look more like a bar-maid, or a farmer's daughter. All the fault of your bringing up, of course."

Stretching out one of her jeweled hands, she gave the skirt of Drusilla's plain, neat traveling-dress a vicious twitch.

"What's this? The sort of stuff you are accustomed to wear? It reminds one of sack-cloth."

"It is the best I could afford," Drusilla answered, sweetly, though her eyes filled.

"Humph. I would not allow even my maid to wear such an outlandish costume."

Turning toward Lester Thornton, who stood slightly apart, an expression of quiet amusement in his handsome eyes, she added with a groan:

"It is not of the least use, Lester. Why did you bring this young barbarian here? Nothing can ever be done with her. Fancy introducing such a creature to my friends as the prospective heiress of Windymere! Bah!"

"She may improve upon acquaintance."

"There's plenty of room for improvement, goodness knows." Then her sharp eyes seemed to pierce the blushing Drusilla like lances. "How old are you?" she abruptly demanded.

"Eighteen."

"You look like a child. I have seldom seen a girl at your age so unformed. Lester tells me you have spent some years working in a dirty factory?" and the woman's very chin quivered with disgust.

The homesick girl bowed, not trusting herself to make audible response.

"Worse and worse. I can smell the horrid place on your garments. I might as well have gone into the gutter for an heiress. It is fortunate you have neither brothers nor sisters. I should wash my hands of them if you had. One of your kind is all I could attempt to civilize."

Rising abruptly, she seized Drusilla's hand, and drew her into the spacious hall, pausing under the portrait of a beautiful young girl dressed in white, with strings of pearl encircling the firm, white throat.

"Lester is right," she muttered, gazing critically from the pictured face to the glowing, living one just below it. "You are marvelously like this picture."

"Is it the portrait of my mother?" Drusilla asked, eagerly.

"No," harshly. "Your mother was an alien—her portrait will never hang among the Severnes. This lady was your great grandmother."

Drusilla turned. Her attention had been caught and riveted by a brilliant, beautiful face that hung close beside the other. It was that of a young woman dressed in a rich trailing robe of maize-colored brocade, with falling, purple-black hair, and diamonds shining in its dusky splendor, and against the dazzling fairness of the alabaster neck.

"Who is it?" Drusilla asked breathlessly, strangely thrilled and fascinated.

An expression of disgust flitted over Mrs. Severne's yellow face.

"Ugh! Come away. I have threatened to take the portrait down. It has no right to be there with the rest. Judith was a Severne, but she disgraced herself; ran away with a common music-teacher and has never been heard from since. Her name is never mentioned in the house, so take warning."

Mrs. Severne returned to her velvet chair, closing her eyes a moment as she sunk into its luxurious depths. Lester Thornton had not stirred, apparently, from his position near by. After an interval the old woman spoke:

"I am greatly disappointed in you, Drusilla. Of course you have grown up ignorant and vulgar. It could not be otherwise with such surroundings. Do you speak French or Italian?"

Annoyed by the supercilious tone, Drusilla flushed as she replied:

"I spoke both fluently while my father was alive. He was a good linguist, and taught me what he could."

"Humph. Did he teach you to play?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Severne turned with a quick little nod.

"Open the piano, Lester. We will soon discover what this young savage has learned."

The cottage parlor had contained no musical instrument of any description. Poor Drusilla was badly out of practice; but she felt a thrill of pleasure as her fingers touched the firm, ivory keys, and played very creditably the very difficult music Mrs. Severne placed before her.

Still no word of encouragement or praise. The old woman only frowned and shook her head.

"Do you sing?"

Drusilla selected a pretty English ballad. Her voice was full, rich and sweet, and filled the lofty room with such a flood of melody as had not been heard there for many a day. But Mrs. Severne,

being in one of her crossdest moods, remained voluntarily blinded to its power.

"Stop!" she cried, in the middle of the refrain. "Such screeching is enough to startle the dead. Your voice must be trained and cultivated if you remain at Windymere. If you remain, I say—you need cherish no delusive hopes. My money is my own, to do with as I choose. At present I feel quite discouraged. It is like picking up a vagabond out of the street. I do not see how it is possible ever to polish or even civilize you."

She took up a French novel that lay upon the table, opening it at random.

"Read a few sentences aloud."

Drusilla did so.

"Bah! your pronunciation is execrable," was the comment. "Now you may translate what you have read."

The rendering given was so delicate and so exact that even Mrs. Severne, who prided herself upon her versatility in that foreign tongue, could find no fault.

"That will do for the present," she said. "I am tired; you can go now. But don't expect too much. It is probable I shall leave my money to found a school. If I do, you shall be entered as its first pupil, and receive your tuition free."

Not a kind word—not one tender, sympathizing glance.

Once in the seclusion of her own room, Drusilla threw herself upon the couch, sobbing as though her heart would break.

The magnificence she had coveted was beginning to pall already. In her grief and homesickness, how gladly would she have exchanged it for the humble little cottage where love dwelt, and only kind and pleasant words were ever heard!

"Ward, why did I ever leave you?" she cried, calling frantically upon her lost lover. "Why listen to the siren voice of avarice and ambition? And now it is too late to turn back—you would never forgive me."

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING CONFESSION.

ONE dark and stormy night, a week later, Ward Templeton was restlessly pacing the floor of a room in a humble tenement house not far from the blackened site of the burned cottage.

Mrs. Templeton lay on a cot-bed in one corner. She had received serious injuries the night of the fire, and now her days were numbered.

Ward himself looked a dozen years older. He carried one arm in a sling, his dark hair had been singed by the flames, his cheeks blistered, and an expression of utter despair brooded in his earnest eyes. All hope and joy had been stricken from his white, wan face.

"Come here, my boy," called a feeble voice from the bed, and as the young man knelt beside her, Mrs. Templeton placed one hand lovingly upon his shoulder.

"It is a terrible trouble, Ward," she whispered. "I loved Drusilla too, and share your sorrow. But you must try to bear it uncomplainingly."

"How can I?" groaned the unhappy man. "She perished before my very eyes. Her cry for help is still ringing in my ears. I am unable to forget it for a moment. I would willingly have given my life for her sweet sake, and yet I could not save her."

"You did what you could, my boy. Here is the evidence," touching his injured arm and blistered cheek. "You rushed into the flames, and would have perished in a mad attempt to rescue poor Drusilla had not strong, friendly hands drawn you back."

A convulsive shudder ran through Ward's frame. Never, while he lived, could he forget the horror and agony of that moment. Drusilla was perishing in the cruel flames, he fully believed, and he had struggled frantically with those who held him back

from rushing to his own destruction until finally he had fallen down exhausted.

"God knows I loved her truly," cried the wretched man, hot tears rising to blind his eyes. "I shall never know a happy moment now that she is dead."

Mrs. Templeton looked at him pityingly, great drops falling down her own pale cheeks.

"Ward," she said, after a pause, "do you know that you will soon be alone in the world? I must follow the same shining road Drusilla has traversed before me."

"Do not speak of it," he answered, with a stifled cry of pain.

"I was not sure you realized the danger, my boy. You have so much to bear—I could not let the end find you unprepared to meet it."

He buried his face in the bedclothes; and the sick woman, sighing faintly, suffered her hand to rest lovingly upon his bowed head.

"You have been very good to me, Ward," she breathed. "No mother ever had a more loyal or devoted son. In all these years you have never wrung my heart with an unnecessary pang. Let that thought comfort you when I am gone."

A brief silence ensued. At last, sighing again, Mrs. Templeton turned painfully upon the pillow.

"Ward, I have something to say to you before I die," she faintly whispered. "But not to-night. I dread the effect of the disclosure I shall make. Let me retain your love and respect as long as possible."

"Mother, what do you mean?" he cried, starting up in unbounded surprise.

"I will tell you to-morrow," she answered, closing her eyes with such a weary expression he could not persist in questioning her.

Later, he was again pacing the floor, his arms folded across his breast and his head bent, when a faint, low sound like a smothered sob echoed through the room.

It thrilled him strangely. He glanced toward the bed, but it did not come from thence. Trembling, he scarcely knew why, he held his breath to listen.

Again that faint, moaning sound quivered through the silence.

He turned his eyes toward the window. Glued against the window-pane, he beheld a pale, beautiful face with clustering curls of golden-brown hair falling about it.

"Drusilla!" he cried, springing forward, and throwing up the sash.

But the lovely, bewildering vision had vanished before he reached the window. He stepped out into the wild, wet night. There was only the impenetrable darkness, the falling rain, and the mournful sobbing of the wind.

"Drusilla?" he called once more.

A dash of rain struck against his face. Then, all at once, he realized the folly of what he was doing.

"I must be half crazed with sorrow to fancy such things," he said hoarsely, as he re-entered the comfortless apartment.

Mrs. Templeton had half raised herself from the pillow, and was gazing at him eagerly.

"I know what it means," she whispered nervously. "It was Drusilla's spirit come to warn me that my time is near at hand."

"Did you see it, too, mother?"

"Yes," she replied.

Ward dropped into a chair, and buried his face in his hands. He was not naturally superstitious, but his heart beat heavy and thick with a nameless sensation.

Mrs. Templeton was worse the next day. Ward saw the uselessness of cherishing hope—she was sinking rapidly. As the day was waning, she called him to the bedside.

"It is not safe to put off any longer what I have to say. My dear boy, you do not realize how well I have loved you. Will you give me a promise before I die?"

"Yes—yes!"

"It is a very simple one—that you will always think kindly and tenderly of me!"

"I could not think of you in any other way, mother."

The dying woman looked up with a start, and a flash of excitement in her glaring eyes.

"Mother!" she repeated. "I have no claim to that holy title, Ward; you are not my son!"

He grew white—white as ashes, and stared at her silently with incredulous eyes.

"You are amazed," she went on, speaking rapidly. "I have kept my secret well. Not even our most intimate friends suspected it. I love you as well as though you were my own son, and yet not one drop of kindred blood flows in our veins."

Rallying herself with an effort, she continued:

"My story is so simple I can tell it briefly. God never granted me the holy joy of motherhood. The disappointment was greater than I can express. I never became fully reconciled to it. My husband loved me truly; but he, too, felt a longing desire for the touch of dimpled baby fingers, the music of childish voices in our home.

"The time came when circumstances induced us to break up old associations and seek new ones in a strange place. Our route lay through New York, and we tarried a few days.

"One morning we were walking in one of the smaller parks. I remember what a lovely morning it was—how the sun shone upon the smooth grass and the waving green of the trees. The breath of roses and lilies floated toward us, but in all the mimic Eden, with its blossoms and beauty, there was nothing half so lovely as a group of happy children playing among the flowers.

"Oh, John! I said to my husband, 'how fair and sweet they are! I would give anything in the world for a child of my own!'

"I felt some one pull suddenly at my sleeve. A woman, closely veiled, was standing beside me, holding a sleeping infant in her arms.

"Are you in earnest?" she whispered rapidly.

"Do you really mean what you say?"

"Yes," I replied, though a good deal startled; 'it is a blessing Heaven has denied me.'

"The woman gave me a long, searching look, then hastily threw back the coverings from the child's face. Rosy, dimpled, innocent, the picture of sweet, confiding helplessness, I felt my heart warm toward it at once.

"Will you take the little one and bring it up as your own?" she asked.

"Surprise held me mute a moment. The burning eyes glanced furtively from me to my husband.

"You need not hesitate," the woman said. 'The child was born of respectable parents, in honorable wedlock, but circumstances compel them to part with it. It will never be claimed or inquired after. I shall take it to a foundling hospital if you decline to receive it.'

"The child's innocence and beauty appealed to my heart. It seemed cruel to abandon the little darling to the fate that menaced. I looked up wistfully into my husband's face.

"Do as you wish, Martha," he said. 'I feel that I could love the child very dearly.'

"That settled the matter. When we went to our new home the child was with us, and no one ever suspected he was not our own. Now you have the whole story, Ward; but no mother ever loved an own son more tenderly than I loved you from the very first. You believe me, Ward?"

"Yes, mother."

Mrs. Templeton smiled, and happy tears filled her eyes as the old endearing name fell from his lips.

"Thanks, my boy," she said, gratefully. "It is like you to remain unchanged. It has cost me a bitter struggle to disclose the truth. I could not have endured to read distrust or aversion in your face."

He pressed his lips to her forehead.

"There is nothing to fear. You are the only mother I have ever known. I shall ever hold you in deepest esteem and reverence."

The young man brooded thoughtfully over the disclosure to which he had just listened, a moment, then said:

"The strange woman—have you seen or heard from her since?"

"Never," Mrs. Templeton replied. "She told me truly—no one has ever come to inquire after you in all these years."

"Do you think she could have been my mother?"

"No,"—decidedly; "it is not possible. No mother could have parted from her offspring so coldly. I did not see her face distinctly, but she had the appearance of being an upper servant in some gentleman's family."

"Was there nothing by which she might be recognized again?"

"I noticed a ring she wore on the third finger of her left hand. It struck me as being incongruous with her plain attire. It was a ruby cross, tipped with diamonds, in a setting of Etruscan gold."

After a moment's silence, Mrs. Templeton produced a small silken bag that she wore suspended about her neck. From it she took a chain of fine gold, to which was attached a small medallion.

"I have kept this for you as a sacred trust, Ward. It is the only link connecting you with the unknown past. I found this chain clasped about your neck. Take it, my boy, and guard it carefully. It may some day prove of untold value to you."

Shortly afterward a strange hush, a holy silence, fell in the room. Not even a pulsation seemed to break it. Ward Templeton leaned over the couch with a quick-drawn breath. That still, pale face, the lips frozen in a smile of peace, told its own story. The angel of death had come and gone again, bearing another trophy.

The days that followed were very lonely and sad for the solitary mourner. Hope, courage, ambition were gone. It became impossible to apply himself to his usual duties. He felt that he had nothing for which to live. At every turn he was reminded of Drusilla, and the patient, loving woman who had been as a mother to him.

"I cannot remain here and keep my reason," he said in his despair.

One day when the burden of sorrow was clinging most heavily about his heart, his attention was accidentally directed to an advertisement that appeared in one of the daily papers.

"Wanted.—An elderly gentleman, in poor health, wishes to secure the services of an intelligent, capable young man who will act at once as private secretary and companion. Address

"MORRIS HASTINGS,
"Hillside, New Jersey."

Weary, disheartened, desirous above all things of a change, Ward applied for the situation and secured it.

What puppets we are in the hands of fate! Hillside was in the near neighborhood of Windymere, Mrs. Severne's country seat. The unsuspecting young man was going straight to the lost love whom he mourned as dead!

CHAPTER VII.

PURPLE AND FINE LINEN.

"We go to the city this afternoon. At three o'clock, sharp. Remember the time. I won't be kept waiting by anybody."

Drusilla glanced up hastily from the pages of the book she was perusing.

"Am I to accompany you, aunt Severne?"

"Of course. Haven't I just intimated as much? I have purchases to make on your account. You are not likely to remain long at Windymere, but you shall not disgrace me while here. I am tired of seeing you in those wretched garments that smell of

the factory. Faugh! Where is my vinaigrette? What a disagreeable odor."

Nearly a week had elapsed since Drusilla's midnight flitting. She was growing accustomed to the new, strange life that had opened up to her so suddenly. The luxurious surroundings, the lordly mansion, the trained domestics, the atmosphere of refinement were all very agreeable to the dazzled young girl. It seemed like going back to her own after a long absence.

And yet there were moments when all these things palled upon her senses, when her heart sickened with homesick longing for those she had left behind, and but for the restraining influence of pride and ambition she would have given up everything and flown back to the dear, faithful friends of the past.

Promptly at the hour specified, accompanied by her maid and Drusilla, Mrs. Severne set out upon her journey. Brief as it was, the old woman complained of being tired, and upon reaching the city drove at once to one of the best hotels, where, after partaking of a luxurious supper, she ordered Peters to put her to bed.

The next morning was spent in making the rounds of the fashionable shops, until poor Drusilla's head was completely turned by the richness and variety of the silks, velvets, laces and ribbons displayed to her dazzled vision.

Behold her, late in the afternoon, in Mrs. Severne's private parlor at the hotel, standing in sheeny billows of satin, silk, and creamy lace that covered the floor with their soft richness and rainbow splendor.

A glitter of excitement was in the velvety softness of her eyes, and a pearly drop or two trembled upon the drooping lashes.

"Are all these beautiful things for me, aunt Severne? How good and kind you are!"

"There, there! No nonsense," testily ejaculated the old woman. "It is to my own credit to dress you well. I find it intensely mortifying to have you pointed out as the grand-niece of the rich Mrs. Severne and hear people say in the same breath, she is dressed like a milk-maid. I would rather palter to your silly vanity than have my own pride so humbled."

Drusilla trembled. Was the woman's heart adamant, a frozen fountain from which sympathy and tenderness had been banished forever?

The longing for affection and appreciation could not be restrained. Braving Mrs. Severne's frown and angry looks the lonely girl fell upon her knees beside the easy-chair.

"I have no one, now, in all the wide world save you," she cried, her tears falling fast. "Take all these costly trappings away, aunt Severne, and give me your love. It would be a thousand times more precious than anything else you could bestow."

The old woman gazed at her a moment with cold scrutiny, then pushed her violently away.

"I know what this means," she said. "Love, in the present case, is only another word for money. A cool million or more. But you can't make a fool of me, Drusilla, with your soft nonsense. Don't try."

Turning away, she spoke abruptly to her maid, and for the next half-hour refused even to look at Drusilla.

But this mood passed. With a grim expression on her face, she finally recalled the wretched young girl.

"Child," she said abruptly, "do you know what decided me to dress you up so fine and gay?"

"Because you were ashamed of the simple garments that smelled of the factory when I was compelled to earn my own support," Drusilla answered innocently.

"Don't repeat my own words. How dare you? The reason you mention had its influence, but there was still another. Lester Thornton took me to task, the other day. He said it was a shame to hide such beauty as yours—for you are pink and white like a wax doll—in coarse, ill-made garments."

A flush suffused the girl's delicate cheeks.

"What can it matter to Mr. Thornton how I dress?"

"It does matter," gazing at her steadily while speaking. "Lester admires you very much, though he is too modest to tell you so upon so short an acquaintance. But there is no necessity for delay or hesitation, between you and me—Lester is handsome and cultivated; he will make a good husband, as men go; I thoroughly approve of the match, and—" "Don't!" cried Drusilla, springing up, and speaking in a tone of pain. "Never even mention such a thing to me again."

"Why not? It is quite time we came to an understanding. My plans were all arranged long ago, and Lester has understood them from the first. You belong to one branch of the family, Lester to the other. Before seeing you I had made up my mind you two should marry if you proved at all suitable for Lester. No better arrangement could be made. Justice could be done you both, and my princely fortune need not be divided."

There was a pause. Drusilla could not speak at first for the choking sensation in her throat. And this was why the young man had been at such pains to seek her? This was why he often looked at her so strangely, and spoke with such an air of proprietorship? Even the lawyers, perhaps, had been in the secret. She, alone, had been kept in the dark.

"You are a sensible girl, with all your faults, and must see the matter in the same light that I do," Mrs. Severne resumed. "Only be submissive, and you shall want for nothing. I will give you jewels and fine dresses, and raise you at once to the position Lester Thornton's prospective wife should occupy."

"Don't!" cried Drusilla again, finding voice at last. "It is quite impossible for me to do as you wish."

"Impossible? What do you mean?"

"I can never marry Mr. Thornton."

Mrs. Severne blazed up like a volcano. "You can not marry him?" she echoed, glaring at the girl with an angry light in her eyes. "Why?"

"Because—I do not love him!"

"Love? Fiddlesticks! You are a child, and don't know your own mind. You will like him well enough when you are once his wife. Nobody marries for love nowadays. We will consider the matter settled. You are to remain, have your fine dresses made, make your debut in society, and by-and-by take Lester for your husband."

"But, aunt Severne—"

"Not another word," cried the old woman, throwing up her jeweled hand impatiently. "I am tired; and I hate long discussions. They always annoyed me. We understand each other now—what more is wanted?"

The glow was fast fading from Drusilla's cheeks, an ashen pallor taking its place. But she answered steadily:

"I fear you do not understand me, aunt Severne. I could not think of receiving benefits under false pretenses. It would not be possible for me to change in this one respect, and—"

"Will you stop talking?" sharply interrupted Mrs. Severne. "Am I the one to be pleased, or are you? Not another word. You will do as I wish. Peters," she added, turning to her maid, "take this disagreeable girl away. Then you may bring me my tea, and put me to bed. She has tired me out."

In the solitude of her own room poor Drusilla stood a moment later, bitter tears falling down her face. She felt an impulse to run away—to leave her harsh, cruel relative forever.

"Marry Lester Thornton?" she cried indignantly. "Give to that man the place Ward Templeton held in my heart? Never!"

Approaching the window, she looked out into the busy, bustling street. How dreary it was despite its activity. The sky was overcast, a fine, penetrating rain had begun to fall, and the purple dusk of twilight was fast closing in.

Drusilla's thoughts wandered back to the humble home she had abandoned. How she longed to throw herself upon Mrs. Templeton's friendly bosom and weep out all her sorrow there—to look once more upon Ward's noble face! It would give her new strength and endurance.

Suddenly she started. She had heard nothing from them save Lester's assurance that they were safe. Why should she not go back, look in upon them a moment, herself unseen, then come away again?

"I will go," she said aloud.

Peters met her in the passage, as she was going down-stairs in her street wraps. The woman stared.

"I am going out for a few moments," said Drusilla confusedly. "Should aunt Severne ask for me, please think of some excuse."

"I will, miss," was the kind response. Peters was fond of the girl, and willing to do her a good turn. "Poor thing," she thought, looking after her. "She is going to the opera, or some place of amusement, of course. Let her go. My mistress will lead her a dog's life. Let her take what pleasure she can."

Drusilla was just in time to catch an outward-bound train, and two hours later reached the small inland town that had once been her home.

Her heart beat painfully as she traversed the familiar streets, a thick veil drawn over her face. She reached the site of the cottage, and found only a heap of blackened ruins. Tears fell from her eyes like rain as she leaned wearily upon the garden palings and looked around.

"How changed everything is," she moaned. "It almost breaks my heart."

The faint, sweet odor of roses floated to her nostrils. The rain was now falling heavily, but she groped about in the wet and darkness until she found a few frail blossoms that had been crushed to earth by the tramping of many feet. Placing them in her bosom, she hurried onward.

A light gleamed like a beacon from the uncurtained windows of a cottage near by. Drusilla approached, and looked within. An involuntary cry broke from her lips. She saw Mrs. Templeton lying upon the low bed, and Ward standing near, looking pallid and careworn.

"My dear, kind friend is ill," she thought. "Lester did not tell me that. I wish I could go to her. She thinks I am dead."

At that moment Ward raised his eyes and saw her. He rushed eagerly to the window, as has been described in another chapter. But Drusilla, yielding to the sudden impulse of terror that came upon her, had turned and fled.

Ere midnight struck, she was back in her solitary room at the hotel; and another crisis in her life had been passed.

The following morning she returned with Mrs. Severne to Windymere.

CHAPTER VIII.

JUDITH SEVERNE'S DAUGHTER.

"SOME one is asking to see you, madam."

The announcement came from Mrs. Merle, the new housekeeper. She stood at the door of the drawing-room where Mrs. Severne, Drusilla and Lester Thornton sat, a strange expression that seemed a blending of dread and exultation upon her pale, thin face.

Drusilla had been reading aloud. Mrs. Severne felt interested for once, and did not like to be interrupted. She turned with a frown.

"Visitors! I can see no one to-day. People never choose a time when they will be welcome. Who is it?"

"A strange lady, madam. She gave no name. But she seemed very anxious to see you. A matter of importance, I should judge from her manner. Shall I show her up?"

Mrs. Severne may have been influenced by curi-

osity alone, or possibly the repressed excitement of the housekeeper's manner had its effect. She settled back in her chair with a sigh of resignation.

"Yes. I will see her. Some beggar, of course."

The next instant a figure glided into the apartment, at sight of which even unimpressible Mrs. Severne was startled—a tall, commanding figure, shrouded from head to foot in a loose cloak, the face effectually concealed by a thick, muffling veil.

"Bless me!" cried the old woman scornfully, after a very brief interval of silence. "What ghost of our dead and gone ancestors have we here?"

"You shall see, and judge for yourself," was the reply given in a singularly rich and musical voice.

Cloak and veil were tossed quickly aside. Mrs. Severne beheld the tall, beautifully-rounded figure of a young woman with a face that was fairly dazzling in its dark, rich loveliness and vivid coloring. Diamonds were braided in the purple-black masses of falling hair, and the new-comer wore a quaint, old-fashioned costume of maize-colored brocade that trailed over the carpet in heavy rustling folds.

In short she was the exact counterpart of the portrait of Judith Severne, hanging in the hall.

"There is no need of an introduction," said the dashing beautiful stranger. "I think you recognize me."

Mrs. Severne rose up, her hands trembling, her eyes gleaming. "You are Judith Severne, or her spirit."

"Not Judith—my poor mother is dead. But Judith's daughter, Ozelma Lorne."

"That's a lie!" cried the old woman. "Judith left no daughter."

There was a flash across the velvety darkness of the girl's eyes.

"I have the true Severne face," she said haughtily. "You cannot deny that. Compare my features with the painted face in the hall and no room will be left for doubt."

There was a pause. Mrs. Severne suddenly caught a fold of the brocade robe between her shaking fingers.

"Suppose we grant the truth of your singular assertion. Where did you get this dress?"

"It was my mother's. I found it carefully laid away in one of her boxes," was the reply, after a scarcely perceptible hesitation.

"And the jewels?"

"They are only paste," flushing a little at the confession. "My mother often described to me how she was dressed when she sat for the portrait. It was an easy matter to imitate her costume."

"Humph. It is all very dramatic and sensational. I am sure," sneered Mrs. Severne. "Be good enough to tell me in so many words what you expect to accomplish, coming here like this."

"I will," Ozelma Lorne answered, as cool as the elder woman. "My father and mother are dead—I am alone in the world. For three years I have supported myself by teaching a country school. The dead-alive existence was driving me mad. I could have endured it no longer. I knew you were very rich, and could afford to help me. Being a Severne, I felt I had a right to be benefited by the fortune my ancestors had accumulated."

Mrs. Severne nodded approval. Here was a nature she could understand, and with which she could sympathize.

"Well," she said grimly, after a moment's thought, "you have taken a singular method to make yourself known. But I shall not send you away. Windymere is large enough for us all. I consent to give you a home for the present. But beyond that concession you have nothing to expect."

Ozelma Lorne bowed her queenly head.

"Thank you, aunt Severne," she said in a softer tone. "Simply a refuge is all I desire—until you know me better."

Old Margaret turned to the gaping maid who stood behind her chair.

"Show Ozelma to the pink room, Peters—the one

opposite Drusilla's. And you can remain to attend to her wants, if she has any."

It was a great concession for Margaret Severne to make. The new-comer must have understood as much, for she smiled, and her eyes gleamed. After a half-scornful glance in Drusilla's direction, a long, searching look at Lester Thornton, who was gazing at her admiringly, she followed the maid from the apartment.

Mrs. Severne sat looking at her folded hands as they lay in her lap. Her face seemed more inscrutable than ever. No one spoke for some moments. It was Lester who broke the oppressive silence.

"Do you really intend to harbor this stranger?"

"Of course," grimly. "My purpose has been made known already."

"She may be an impostor."

"But she isn't. No one but a Severne ever had that face."

She suddenly threw her head back, chuckling audibly.

"It is like a page out of a three-volume novel, Lester. I advertised for an heiress, and now have two upon my hands, and can choose between them. I shall use one to play against the other, and thus keep them both in subjection. I find the situation vastly amusing. Look to your laurels, Drusilla. Your chances of inheriting the Severne million are growing beautifully less."

Meanwhile Ozelma Lorne on reaching the chamber assigned to her use, had abruptly dismissed the maid, saying she did not require her services, and immediately locked the door against all intruders. Her eyes shining, a superb color glowed in her rounded cheeks.

"I have succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations," she said to herself, walking rapidly up and down the elegantly-furnished room, the heavy folds of her trailing robe sweeping the carpet. "The entree to Windymere was easily attained. Should every step in the game I have undertaken prove as effectual, I shall soon be undisputed mistress of the mansion and the old she-dragon's wealth. The prize I covet is worth a desperate struggle."

An hour later a knock sounded on the closed door. It was Mrs. Merle, the housekeeper, who entered when she flung back the bolts.

A moment the two stood gazing at each other in silence. Then the elder woman spoke.

"You are here, Ozelma, and understand the situation. Can you carry the game we have undertaken to a successful termination?"

"I have no fears," was the haughty reply. "The word 'failure' was never yet written upon my banner."

"But you never undertook anything that involved so many risks."

"I shall redouble my efforts."

A brief pause. Mrs. Merle stepped to the door, and after listening there a moment, turned away.

"No one saw me enter," she said in a rapid whisper. "It must not be suspected that we ever met before to-day."

"It is unnecessary to caution me," half-scornfully. "Now tell me something of the man I saw in the drawing room. It was Lester Thornton, of course?"

"Yes, your future husband, should things go according to our liking." She darted a searching glance into the girl's glowing face. "What do you think of him?"

"He is very handsome."

"Do you think it will be possible to love him?" The anxiety in the woman's face was too great to be concealed.

"Love him?" echoed the other with a hard laugh. "What difference does it make? I would marry him were he ugly as Caliban."

"You must, if you hope ever to reign at Windymere as mistress. Mrs. Severne is resolved he shall have a share in her immense wealth. She has

planned a marriage between him and Drusilla Creeme. But you with your superb beauty and cunning arts can easily supplant that girl—in Mrs. Severne's affections as well as the young man's love. In short, you must step between her and the glittering prize she covets."

The beautiful face was transformed for a second by baleful passion. The greenish fire of hate flashed from the dusky eyes.

"It will be at her deadly peril if that girl comes in my way," she hissed.

The next moment she had calmed herself. That radiant face seemed calm and peaceful as the summer ocean.

"It is very good of you to interest yourself in my affairs," she said, looking hard at the woman. "You are my friend. And yet, deep as is the regard you profess for me, I cannot resist the conviction that the interest you feel in Lester Thornton is still greater. Now tell me why."

Mrs. Merle's face grew deadly pale, and her teeth almost chattered.

"What delusion are you taking up?" she stammered, struggling hard for self-command. "The young man is nothing to me—nothing! For your sake alone am I planning and scheming. Mrs. Severne likes him. Only as his wife can you hope to inherit the whole of the immense wealth that must soon go a-begging. That is my reason—my only reason—for advising this marriage."

"No thought of Lester Thornton's own advantage comes into the question?"

"None whatever," Mrs. Merle answered, but her head drooped, and a moment later she abruptly went out.

Ozelma stood for a moment with her beautiful brows knitted in perplexed thought. For years had she been more or less intimately associated with this woman. They two knew more of each other than any third person knew of either. Mrs. Merle had secured her situation at Windymere with a fixed purpose in view. She had been instrumental in bringing Ozelma there, accomplishing this as soon as she dared after Drusilla's abrupt appearance.

And yet the beautiful adventuress knew there were pages in the elder woman's life that had never been opened even for her inspection.

"Strange!" she muttered, perplexedly. "I cannot understand why it should be so, but the suspicion will come that Mrs. Merle is working for Lester's advantage rather than mine—that I am only the means to an end. If this is so, I am shrewd enough to find out her secret, and I'll do it, too!"

The lamps were lighted before she joined the circle below stairs. She still wore the old-fashioned brocade, and the mock diamonds in her hair. No ornament broke the white outline of the throat or the beautiful arms, bared to the shoulder. She had the air of a queen.

Mrs. Severne made room on the sofa at her side. "I knew your mother," she said, speaking in a tone of unusual kindness. "You are wonderfully like her."

Ozelma lifted her beautiful, glowing face with an air of wistful entreaty.

"Try to love me for her sake," she whispered. "My lonely life has been blessed with very little true affection."

Later, she stood in one of the deep window embrasures, face to face with Lester Thornton. Outside, the silver stars were shining in a purple sky; the perfumed night-wind came in at the open casement and kissed their cheeks. Lester was almost dazzled as he gazed into those dusky eyes, but he felt no thrill of lover-like rapture.

"How beautiful you are!" he exclaimed. "Cleopatra of old could not have boasted of so bewildering a face."

Ozelma returned his gaze. He, too, looked like a prince, with his dark, manly beauty. But no pulse thrummed the quicker for his presence, no thrills of tingling sweetness shot through her veins.

"I do not love him," she said to herself. "I never shall. He is not my fate; but I must be his wife all the same. Have I no heart? or is the only magician who can set it to throbbing still to come?"

Ozelma Lorne was destined to have this question answered sooner than she imagined. The torch of love only waited for the hand that could kindle it, when it would burn with consuming fire.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MILLS OF GOD.

"I HAVE invited my old friend, Morris Hastings, of Hillside, to dine with me to-day. He will be here at three."

Such was the announcement Mrs. Severne made one morning on rising from the breakfast-table.

Hillside was only a short distance away, and courtesies of this sort had been exchanged between the two households since time immemorial.

Two quiet weeks had drifted on since Ozelma Lorne's advent at Windymere—weeks that brought no important events in their train. The little household was falling into more settled ways—the different members coming to know each other better. But this was the only change.

When the hour of three came round, bringing with it the expected visitor, Mrs. Severne sat in the drawing-room alone, waiting to receive him. Lester Thornton had gone to the city, and Drusilla was still in her chamber.

But the fragrance-breathing conservatory held an occupant. Ozelma Lorne stood there, in the midst of the fragrant bloom and beauty in which her sensuous nature delighted. Trailing vines hung in graceful festoons above her head, bright flowers made banks of brilliant beauty on either hand, and the air was laden with the perfume of roses and carnations.

Ozelma stood close to the glass door, now slightly ajar, that led into the ante-room from which the drawing-room opened. Suddenly the half-scornful smile faded from her lips, and leaning slightly forward, she parted the clustering vines, and gazed with bated breath into the smaller room beyond.

Two gentlemen were being ushered in. Ozelma scarcely glanced at the tall, stooping figure of him who walked in advance. Morris Hastings, of course? Her gaze was riveted as though fascinated upon the melancholy-looking, though handsome, young man who followed.

"Who is it?" she asked herself, a strange thrill darting through her breast. "Aunt Severne expected but one guest."

He paused to admire a fine engraving hanging upon the wall, thus affording Ozelma an opportunity to study his face still more closely. She had seen handsomer faces, scores of them, but never one that moved her like this.

It was a noble face, but unutterably sad. A shadow rested about the firm, mobile mouth, the dark soft eyes were full of brooding sorrow.

As Ozelma gazed she felt the surges of passion rising and swelling in her heart. Her pulses beat, her brain burned, the blood seemed to course with lightning-like rapidity through her veins. "She

"Looked up and loved him,
With a love that was her doom."

"Strange!" she muttered, gazing into that sad, grave face like one entranced. "I have sometimes fancied myself incapable of a grand passion. And yet I feel that I could die for this man I never saw before, to whom I have not spoken, of whose very name I am ignorant."

She clasped her hands tightly above her beating heart.

"I love him—he is my doom," she wailed. "And yet, Heaven pity me, I must give myself to another."

Meanwhile, within the luxurious drawing-room, Mr. Hastings and Mrs. Severne had met, and were interchanging greetings.

"I am very glad to see you," old Margaret said with greater cordiality than she often expressed. We were always the best of friends, Morris. I discuss my affairs with you as though you were a brother. I might as well tell you at the outset that I am now in need of your assistance and advice—"

She paused, abruptly, at this moment catching sight of the inert figure in the ante-room.

"A stranger! Who is it, Morris, a friend you have brought along?"

The old gentleman smiled.

"No, Margaret. That is Ward Templeton, my private secretary and companion."

The name did not enlighten Mrs. Severne in the least. She had heard it before, to be sure, but it did not occur to her at the moment that the people with whom Drusilla had been associated for some time were called Templeton.

But she found something vastly amusing in the thought of the position the young man occupied in the household of her old friend,

"Private secretary! companion!" she repeated scornfully. "Have you fallen suddenly into your dotage, Morris Hastings? Really this is too absurd."

The old gentleman flushed angrily.

"Why shouldn't I have a companion if I desire one? They are often engaged by old ladies like yourself, when they are lonely or indolent. I fail to see what right your sex has to monopolize the genus."

"To be sure," laughed Mrs. Severne. "Engage a dozen, if you wish. It is no business of mine. But, really, I can't imagine what you find for him to do."

"Mr. Templeton reads to me, writes my letters, amuses me when feeling dull, and transacts any trifling matter of business that I do not wish to intrust to a servant," Mr. Hastings answered stiffly.

"I find him a great acquisition."

"Indeed. I am growing interested. Pray call your prodigy in and present him to me."

Mrs. Severne received the young man kindly. Indeed there was something in his noble bearing and grave dignity that impressed her strangely. She found herself turning constantly to gaze at him, and something in his voice sounded familiar, like a half-forgotten melody.

She soon began to speak freely in his presence.

"Now I am going to tell you why I invited you to dine with me to-day, Morris," she said abruptly to her old friend. "I intimated when you entered that I was in need of your advice."

"I shall be glad to give it, Margaret," said the old gentleman with a courtly bow.

"It is not in the nature of things that I can live many years longer. For some time now I have been thinking seriously of finding some one to succeed me—an heir to my immense possessions—"

"I thought Lester Thornton—"

"Lester Thornton is well enough in his way," interrupted old Margaret sharply. "But I do not fancy the idea of leaving everything to him. He represents but one side of the family—my dead husband's; there are others who have still stronger claims upon me."

Mrs. Severne picked up a fan that lay beside her, and began fanning it leisurely.

"In short, I have been led into doing something foolish as well as you, Morris," she resumed. "I advertised for a missing relative, and found her. She had been here but a few days before another unexpectedly put in an appearance. You will see them both at dinner. Please observe closely, and give me your opinion of each, afterward. I intend to choose between the two, marry the fortunate one to Lester, and give the young people everything."

The old woman had secretly made her choice already. She intended to stick to her old preference for Drusilla. But it would be a comfort to know that a valued friend like Morris Hastings, thoroughly approved it.

"Who are these newly-found relatives?" the old gentleman inquired, really interested.

"One is the daughter of runaway Judith whom, perhaps, you remember."

"Yes, I knew her very well. And the other?"

"Is Drusilla Dreeme, Garrison's only child."

Ward Templeton had been paying very little heed to the conversation. But at the mention of that name his heart gave a great strangling throb of pain. He started up pallid, incredulous, fairly gasping for breath.

"Whom did you say?" he hoarsely panted, seizing hold of old Margaret's arm.

She stared, but repeated the name. The young man's deep emotion amazed her, but even then she had no inkling of the real truth.

"You may have heard of Drusilla," she said. "Sit down; I will give you a few facts concerning her history if you wish."

Ward sunk into a chair. Great drops of anguish were starting upon his forehead. For some moments it seemed to him that he must be going mad.

"It is like a story," Mrs. Severne said, then laughed. "Drusilla was leading a dog's life. Her parents were dead, and had left her penniless. She was working for her daily bread in a common, dirty factory when she found my advertisement. Poor thing; it must have seemed like divine interposition in her behalf. The hard, common life she led was utterly abhorrent to her nature. I can imagine how she exulted at the prospect of being rid of it. She made her home with some goody people as poor as herself. I believe she was sincerely attached to them. But she knew that the old life must be forgotten, and her old associates given up, if I consented to receive her into my house. But of course wealth and position tipped the balance, and she came to me."

Ward's face was now hidden in his hands. "My God!" burst hoarsely from his quivering lips.

Old Margaret was looking down at her yellow, jeweled hands, and did not even hear.

"Chance favored Drusilla," she went on, repeating the story as she had received it from Lester Thornton. "Of course these poor people might have proved a great annoyance to her. She was at a loss how to rid herself of them effectually. But their house burned down, in the nick of time, and she escaped in the confusion, leaving her humble friends to believe that she had perished in the flames."

Ward Templeton could bear no more. White, ghastly, cold, he rose and staggered into the ante-room. His heart beat heavy and thick, great drops stood upon his forehead.

So it was Drusilla herself, and no vision of a diseased imagination, he had beheld looking in at the window that dark and stormy night.

He clinched his trembling hands. An agony terrible as that of death shot through his frame. His staring eyes saw nothing but dancing lights, and a sound as of surging waters was in his ears.

Drusilla lived! She was under that very roof! All his grievous sorrow had been for nothing—she had deliberately deceived him.

Was it possible for any one to be so cruel, so heartless, so utterly selfish? Death, even the sudden, horrible death he had been led to believe had overtaken her, seemed as nothing in comparison. Little Drusy, the dear, innocent, trusting child he had loved so devotedly—could it be she had been led into a course so unworthy?

He raised his white face, so terrible in its ashen pallor. He stretched out his trembling, passionate hands.

"God forgive her for dealing me this cruel blow," he said, aloud. "I never will."

Even as he spoke there came a rustling sound, the door slowly unclosed, and Drusilla stood before him.

CHAPTER X.

STEEPED IN BITTERNESS.

For a few breathless moments they stood gazing at each other, and neither uttered a word. Ward

was, to a certain extent, prepared for the surprise. But Drusilla had been taken wholly by surprise. She felt an intense longing to spring forward and sob out all her grief and penitence upon her lover's bosom, but something in his cold, steady gaze restrained her.

But she took a hasty step toward him, raising her fair, sweet face, now pale with bewilderment and terror.

"Ward, is it really you?" she breathed, in a low, frightened tone. "I—I—did not expect to see you here. Why don't you speak to me?"

She drew still nearer, and would have rested her two hands upon his arm in the old, familiar, loving gesture, but he thrust her away violently.

"Do not touch me. This is my reward for the affection and trust I gave you! Fool! I might have known there was no such thing in the world as pure, disinterested love."

"Oh, Ward, what are you saying to me?" she cried in the accents of intense suffering and dread.

"It is good to hear the truth spoken in unvarnished language," he answered bitterly.

With a cry of anguish Drusilla sunk on her knees before him and lifted her white face, so full of piteous entreaty. All the sorrow, yearning, and remorse of those long, lonely days of separation was in that look.

"Ward, forgive me," she pleaded. "I have sinned, but I have also suffered. No wonder you are angry with me. Won't you try to think of the past as though it had never been? Won't you give me the opportunity to atone?"

"You have deceived me once—I could never trust you again," he answered coldly. "It is useless to plead to me."

A moan of distress broke from her quivering lips. She stared at him wildly, almost incredulously. Was this the patient, devoted lover who had once been so submissive to a look or the gentlest behest?

"You do not understand," she murmured, faintly.

"I understand but too well. Rise, Drusilla, do not kneel to me."

They were too deeply engrossed to hear the rustle of Ozelma Lorne's dress in the conservatory. And yet she had come close to the glass door; she was looking and listening. At first with jealous rage and wonder, but later, as she noticed the cold light on Ward Templeton's ghastly face, with a feeling of growing satisfaction.

Poor Drusilla could no longer restrain herself. Seizing one of his listless hands, she pressed it against her cheek, down which scalding tears of remorse were now falling.

"Pity me! be merciful!" she sobbed. "I am so wretched, so unhappy. I was tired of the uncongenial life I led, and the prospect of inheriting aunt Severne's wealth presented a great temptation. It finally overcame me. I have been weak and wicked, Ward, recreant to the trust reposed in me. Can you not understand how a young, impulsive girl might be led by a glittering bait such as was thrown in my way? You seemed cold and indifferent, Ward; I fancied you loved your own ambitious plans better than you loved me. But there has not been a moment since I left the dear, humble cottage that was my home when I would not gladly have returned to its shelter."

"Do you recall under what circumstances you went away?"

"Too well," she answered, a hot flush of shame rising to her temples.

He fell back a step, and his rigid face seemed to harden yet more when he spoke.

"That poor little cottage, shabby and barren as it seemed to you, was my home; I loved it dearly. The happiest hours of my life had been passed within its walls. It was being consumed to the ground when you looked your last upon it. You did not linger to learn what had been my fate, or that of the patient, devoted woman who had been like a mother to you. Cold, cruel, selfish, unfeeling

you turned away, leaving us to the agonizing fear that you had perished in the flames. You must have exulted over the opportunity fate threw in your way. You did not care what we might suffer, or what befell us. Your only thought was to be rid of us forever—left free to follow out your ambitious schemes."

"Oh, Ward, you judge me too harshly," she cried, imploringly, putting up her hands. "One word—let me explain—"

"You can say nothing to atone for the utter heartlessness of your conduct," he coldly interrupted. "Nothing to bring back the noble life that was sacrificed."

"Life? sacrificed?" she repeated. Then the truth broke suddenly upon her mind. She recalled the scene she had looked in upon out of the darkness and storm, that memorable night. A bitter wail sounded over her trembling lips.

"Mrs. Templeton is dead!"

He gazed sternly down at her.

"Yes. But, thank God, she died without knowing how unworthy and selfish you had shown yourself."

It was like a blow. She tried to control herself, but spasms of pain chased each other over her working face. She crouched lower and lower in her grief and humiliation, until the long, silken curls of nut-brown hair swept his feet.

"I was not prepared for this," she panted.

"Ward, I loved your mother, loved her truly. I would gladly give my own life to recall hers. Let me plead to you in her name. She wished to see us happy. I am willing to give up all—everything save your love. I will leave this house now, this very hour, and beg my bread, if necessary, for your sake. What are riches and social position without you? Only speak one kind word to me. I am not so cruel and heartless as you have imagined. Only say that you forgive and will trust me still."

It is strange how he resisted such passionate pleading. Had the wound been less deep, it would not have been possible. The sweet face, the sad, entreating voice, the falling tears, touched him deeply. But he recalled Mrs. Severne's words, the bare, hard facts of Drusilla's sudden flight, the unbroken silence of the intervening weeks. These facts rankled in his heart like poisoned arrows. There could be no doubt but she had fully intended to rid herself of him forever. It was only a momentary fit of penitence and remorse that now led her to humble herself.

"Forgive you?" he repeated, with an access of bitterness as these thoughts flitted through his mind. "Never! I know you were tired of me long ago. You have dealt me the cruellest blow man ever received. Avarice and ambition are the ruling passions of your heart. I will not stand in your way. Go on in the career you have begun. Deck yourself out in silks and jewels; gather about you all the luxuries and honors this world can bestow. It does not matter. Should these things pall, and turn to Dead Sea fruit, it is nothing to me. You are only reaping as you have sown. It is the career you deliberately chose for yourself. Drusilla, you can never be even a friend to me again."

He turned abruptly as he spoke. Drusilla half rose to her feet, and staggered after him a few steps, uttering a faint cry of distress.

"Mercy! mercy! I shall die if you leave me like this."

He would not even look back. Passing on rapidly, he entered the drawing-room where Mr. Hastings and Mrs. Severne still sat, chatting amicably. The latter looked up with an expression of wonder, as she beheld his ghastly face.

"What is the matter, Mr. Templeton? Are you ill?"

She started up impulsively. Whether it was the quick, impetuous movement, or some other cause, will never be known. But suddenly the heavy chandelier under which she sat, began to oscillate. Ward

had barely time to spring forward and drag her forcibly from her perilous position when it fell with a loud crash.

Mrs. Severne escaped uninjured. But she was horrified, as she turned, trembling and panting, to see the young man lying stark and still at her feet.

"He is dead!" she shrieked. "One of the branches must have struck him."

Her startled cry was echoed by a sweet young voice, quivering with anguish and horror, and Drusilla rushed past and knelt beside her unconscious lover.

"Look up! Speak to me, Ward!" she implored, in accents of piteous entreaty. Claspings his cold hands, she covered them with passionate tears and kisses.

"My God! He is dead! He will never speak to me again. Never know how fondly and truly I love him."

Her beautiful head drooped, her sad eyes closed, and with a long, shuddering sigh she sunk down beside him insensible.

Mrs. Severne and her guest stared at each other in wondering dismay. To them the scene was utterly incomprehensible.

But another entered, at this moment, who understood it perfectly. Lester Thornton had returned unexpectedly from the city. A moment he stood as though rooted to the spot, his handsome face darkening with anger and dread. Then he addressed Mrs. Severne in a hurried whisper:

"What was this fellow doing here? How did he find Drusilla out?"

"Who—who—is he?" panted old Margaret. "What do you mean?"

A single word sufficed to explain all. So this was the low-born lover to whom Lester had once or twice referred? The woman's eyes flashed, and she rung a sharp peal upon the bell.

"Bring help and carry this child to her room, and bring restoratives," she said to the servant who appeared.

Afterward she bent over Ward, touching her jeweled hand to his forehead.

"I do not think he is dead," she cried suddenly.

"Bring a physician. He saved my life—I cannot wish him ill. But it is most unfortunate that chance brought him to Windymere."

CHAPTER XI.

PATIENT AND NURSE.

WHEN Ward Templeton recovered consciousness, he was lying upon a couch in the most elegantly-furnished apartment he had ever seen. It was evening; the soft, subdued glow of wax-light fell upon the velvet hangings and costly adornments. A physician stood near, measuring some liquid into a glass.

Ward stirred, and the physician leaned over the couch, gazing at him with eager scrutiny.

"You are better," he said. "I am glad. Drink this cordial."

The young man obeyed. He was still too weak to have a will of his own. When the glass had been removed from his lips, he fell back with a strange sense of giddiness and apathy.

How long this stupor lasted he never knew. He felt ill, his head ached, his brain burned. At last he roused a little, and realized that the doctor had gone and a woman taken his place. The soft rustle of her dress was audible from time to time, and a faint odor of violets floated to him where he lay.

Finally he turned to look at her. It was no hired nurse who sat beside the couch, but the most marvelously-beautiful woman he had ever beheld. The brilliant, beautiful face, with its siren eyes, its luring lips and rich, warm tints, was turned toward him, and something in its expression made his heart leap.

"Is this Windymere?" he inquired, with an effort—for he felt uncertain.

"Yes," she replied, in a voice of liquid music. "But pray do not talk. You are very weak."

"Will you not tell me something of yourself?"

"What does it matter? You were so ill, and had shown yourself so brave and noble, I could not leave you to be nursed by a hireling. Mrs. Severne is a distant relation. I am Ozelma Lorne."

Ward lay silent and thoughtful. His reflections were not pleasant ones. She—a stranger—could come to him with kindness and sympathy in his danger; but Drusilla remained aloof. Well, what else had he to expect? Her so-called love had been weighed before in the balance and found wanting.

How was he to know that poor Drusilla, at that very moment, was shut into one of the apartments at the other end of the house, too weak and faint to leave her couch?

The night passed like a confused dream. Much of the time Ward lay in a sort of stupor. But through it all he was always conscious of Ozelma's continued presence in the room. She moved about grave, deft, silent, anticipating every want, like an angel of blessing. The touch of her soft, cool hand upon his forehead, even in the moments of greatest restlessness, had almost the soothing effect of an opiate.

Toward morning he roused a little and spoke.

"Where is Miss Dreeme? Has she made no attempt to see me?"

Ozelma shook her head.

"Drusilla seemed out of sorts, and retired early. She left orders with her maid that she was on no account to be disturbed."

A bitter smile curved Ward's lips. "Heartless and selfish as ever," was his mental comment.

As Ozelma sat watching the sick man, her heart beat in a wild tumult. The blood rushed in a fiery flood through her veins, and her dark eyes glowed with a passionate light. She who had laughed at love was stricken as with the plague. She could have given her life for this grave, handsome stranger who had so unexpectedly crossed her path.

"If he stood in Lester Thornton's place, I would win him or die," she said to herself. "I should be deliciously happy. But now—"

Well, the situation must be studied. She loved wealth and power. She had come to Windymere to acquire them, and of course the paid secretary of Morris Hastings could offer neither. But, then, what a dreary pilgrimage life would be without love now she had had one taste of its delights.

She had flirted with Lester Thornton, and set herself deliberately to insure him. But love was not the impelling motive. Not a single pulse had ever thrilled responsively to his voice or touch.

"This stranger is to be my doom," she whispered, her eyes lingering wistfully upon the pale, noble face, from which the rings of damp hair were thrown carelessly back. "I am almost powerless to flee from his presence. Why should I? Nay, let me drink for a time of the cup held to my lips, be the after-consequences what they may."

In the soft, opal light of early morning a weak, tottering figure descended the stairs and stole along the corridor, clinging to the wall for support. Ward was sleeping at the time. But, above the low sound of his breathing Ozelma's quick ear detected that slow, hesitating step.

Rising hastily, she stepped outside the door, closing it carefully behind her. The worn white face, raised so wistfully to hers, should have awakened compassion, but it did not.

"Is he better?" Drusilla asked in a faint, eager whisper.

"Yes. There is hope," Ozelma answered. "But he must be kept very quiet. He is sleeping now."

"Thank God. When I saw him lying there so faint and white, I fancied he was dead."

Drusilla had never liked the beautiful girl; but now she seized her hand and kissed it gratefully.

"It was very good and kind of you to remain with him, Ozelma. I was too weak to rise, or I should have been here before. Has he asked for me?"

"Never once," came the unblushing response. Drusilla's eyes filled with sudden tears.

"He is angry with me still. How doubly hard it seems to have the brunt of his displeasure to bear at such a time! But I deserve to suffer."

Then she raised her soft eyes in a pleading look.

"Let me enter. Let me look at his face just once. Then I will go quietly away."

"What comfort would it be to you?" said Ozelma sharply. "You plead like a foolish child. Mr. Templeton must on no account be disturbed."

"Only one look," Drusilla entreated.

"He might awaken. He is too weak to bear the least excitement. I feel compelled to deny your request."

Hastily re-entering the sick chamber, Ozelma closed the door upon the wretched pleader.

Two or three hours later, she ventured to come again. Her eyes were red with weeping, her sweet face haggard and worn with grief.

Ozelma intercepted her in the corridor as before.

"You should not come here," she said coldly.

"What is the use? Mr. Templeton does not wish to see you."

"Did he say so?" whispered the faint, agonizing voice.

"Yes," was the unhesitating response. "He seems to dislike you, and said you were not to be admitted. I shall not venture to disregard his instructions."

Drusilla clasped her trembling hands. "Oh, this is very hard!" she moaned, turning away.

The sick man looked up wistfully when Ozelma again approached the couch. "You were speaking with some one in the corridor," he said eagerly. "Who was it?"

"Only one of the maids."

Ward heaved a sigh of disappointment. He fancied he had recognized the voice. "I was mistaken," he told himself. "She will not come. Why should I wish it?"

His only visitor during the day was Mrs. Severne. Late in the afternoon old Margaret entered the room, resplendent in rustling brocade and old Flemish point that might have purchased a king's ransom.

"Dr. Pillsbury tells me you are threatened with fever," she said. "I hope you will escape it. I should be sorry to have you suffer on my account. Anything this house has to offer is at your disposal."

She paused abruptly, a startled look flaming into her bead-like eyes. It often happens that sickness brings out a likeness never before noticed or suspected. Mrs. Severne saw something of the sort at the present moment. She fell back a step, flushing purple.

"Strange," she muttered. "What an extraordinary resemblance."

Ozelma was standing near. Her quick ears caught the words, and she turned with a glow of eager interest.

"What do you mean? Explain yourself, aunt. Is Mr. Templeton like any one you have ever known?"

But old Margaret had recovered herself. "Ask Lester Thornton," was the non-committal reply. And with a short laugh, the woman went her way.

But Ozelma had found food for reflection. If there was a mystery, she possessed sufficient shrewdness to find it out.

Poor Drusilla made a last attempt to see her alienated lover. As the cool, fragrant twilight fell, she found the door unguarded for a moment. Ward heard her light, swift step crossing the floor, and turned his face to the wall with a bitter cry.

"How dare you come here?" he panted, all his anger and resentment rising in arms. "I hoped never to see you again. Go—leave me."

"Will you not give me one kind word?" breathed the poor girl. "Will you not assure me that we are friends again?"

He half-raised himself, and pointed to the door, looking so pallid and excited she was half-terrified.

"Unless you go at once I shall ring for a servant to take you away."

How she got back to her room the heart-sick girl scarcely knew. Mrs. Severne stood there, just across the threshold, her yellow old face livid with anger.

"I will allow no nonsense," she said, her eyes blazing. "The sick man is nothing to you; you are less than nothing to him. Lester Thornton's wife must be above the folly of running after old sweethearts. I hope you understand. You are to see him no more. I seldom condescend to warn the second time. Please bear that fact in mind."

And she went out and locked the door.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TURNING TIDE.

AFTER the first day Ward began to gain strength. The wound he had received from the falling chandelier pained him less, and the fever began to abate.

Ozelma Lorne kept her post as self-constituted nurse. Mrs. Merle had remonstrated with her, but uselessly. She fully realized her folly, but was powerless to struggle against it, so deep was the infatuation to which she had succumbed.

Ward's eyes began to follow her with growing interest. She made a charming picture, moving about the sick-room, bestowing deft, noiseless touches here and there. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever beheld. Ward's languid gaze delighted to linger upon her queenly form, her brilliant face, the glowing tint of her lips, the rich color playing in her cheeks, the dusky splendor of her fragrant hair.

One day when the influence of her presence seemed stronger than usual he said abruptly:

"It is not usual for one so young and beautiful to give up all the pleasures of society and devote herself to a sick stranger. Why have you done so, Miss Lorne?"

Her face flushed crimson, and her musical voice trembled as she replied:

"You have no friends, no sister or mother. It seemed cruel to leave you to suffer alone."

"And so, out of the goodness of your heart, you have devoted yourself to my service?"

She drew nearer, as though impelled by a magnetism over which she had no control.

"I have found pleasure in ministering to your wants," she softly answered. "It has been no hardship."

A brief silence ensued. Ward felt the warm blood coursing like a lava-flood through his veins. He trembled, and his heart throbbed deliriously. Manlike, he found it impossible to resist the seductive spell of such beauty and devotedness.

"You are a good, noble woman," he said huskily, holding out his weak hands. "There are a few such in this hollow world. If you loved, I believe you would be faithful unto death."

"Unto death," she solemnly repeated, leaning over him, and gathering his hands into her own.

Both trembled as they gazed into each other's eyes. Ozelma could not hide the passionate ardor in her own. It burned in their beautiful depths like a consuming fire. All the world was forgotten—it was one of those moments when love reigns triumphant.

"You would sacrifice wealth and position for him who had won your heart?" he whispered breathlessly.

"Yes. They would not be weighed in the balance one moment. Poverty, suffering, even disgrace would be met without a murmur."

He drew her nearer. Some passionate words trembled upon his lips. But they were never uttered. Mrs. Merle entered at that moment—the spell was broken.

The housekeeper gave them a sharp, angry glance as she approached. Bending over Ozelma, she whispered a few hurried words in her ear.

"Are you mad? Would you sacrifice all your hopes of the future to a short-lived folly?"

Then she stepped between the girl and the couch. Ward Templeton had been in the house three days, but this was the first time she had entered the sick-chamber or ever beheld him.

One glance, and she fell back suddenly, a hoarse, startled cry breaking from her lips. She had been struck, like Mrs. Severne, by the remarkable resemblance he bore to some person she had known.

"My God! Who are you?"

Ward echoed the exclamation, though for a very different cause. Blazing upon the third finger of the housekeeper's left hand was a ring of singular design—a ruby cross, tipped with diamonds, in a setting of Etruscan gold!

The sight of the unique ornament recalled Mrs. Templeton's strange disclosure. It did not seem possible the ring could have a counterpart in the world. It had the appearance of being an heirloom. Ward felt his heart thrill with eager anticipation. The woman had seemed struck by something familiar in his appearance.

Could it be he had accidentally stumbled upon the only person who could unravel the mystery of the past?

Seizing hold of her arm, he spoke in a hoarse, agitated whisper.

"Woman, you ask who I am. The question is, I believe, one you are better able to answer than I am. An overruling Providence has brought us face to face. It is the will of Heaven that all things shall be explained."

Frightened, subdued, Mrs. Merle sunk pallid and breathless into a chair that stood beside the couch.

"What do you mean?" she faltered. "I—I—do not understand. Why do you address to me such inexplicable words?"

"Because I fully believe you are the woman who consigned me to the charge of my foster-mother, more than twenty years ago."

Mrs. Merle uttered one low cry, and covered her ghastly face with her hands.

"My God!"

Ward drew them away angrily.

"Look at me," he sternly commanded. "Tell me the truth. Are you that woman, or are you not?"

She raised her head defiantly, and seemed to rally her energies by a desperate effort.

"It is a singular question for you, a stranger, to ask. I am utterly bewildered—at a loss to understand what you can mean. Is there a mystery in your life, the solution of which you seek through my instrumentality?"

"Yes," he replied. "All the years of my life I have borne a name not my own. Of my father and mother, and my true position in the world, I know absolutely nothing. Do not keep me a moment in suspense. If you can reveal the secret, do so immediately."

Ozelma looked from one to the other in wonder. She remarked the young man's intense earnestness—she read also the abject terror and dread written upon the woman's face. It was so great that her lips quivered and she shook like a leaf in the wind, despite her efforts at self-control. Did Mrs. Merle really hold the key to the mystery enshrouding Ward Templeton's life?

Ozelma waited with bated breath for her to speak. "Ward may belong to a wealthy and honored family," she thought. "If so, I shall give up all thought of Windymere and aunt Severne's millions. Nothing will stand between us, and I will win him or die."

No wonder she leaned toward them with parted lips and hushed breathing.

The housekeeper took another moment in which to collect her thoughts. She was not one who often found herself at a loss.

"You are laboring under a delusion of some nature," she said. "I fail to fully gather your meaning, even yet. You are a foundling, it seems, and

have somehow taken up the strange fancy that I know all about your birth and parentage. Is not that the way the case stands?"

"Yes. Years ago, when I was only a little babe, my dear foster-mother one day encountered a strange woman in one of the New York parks. The woman held me in her arms. Some words she overheard my foster-mother say, induced her to offer me to her for adoption. We will not waste words. Answer my question. Are you that woman?"

The white lips opened, but she was compelled to make several efforts before any sound escaped them.

"I am not," she replied, sullenly. "I never saw you before, and know nothing of your history. Now tell me why you have taken up so absurd a fancy."

Ward pointed to the ring on her finger.

"This woman wore one precisely like it. I have heard my foster-mother describe it too minutely to be mistaken. It is a very peculiar ring—I doubt if there can be another like it in existence."

The expression of Mrs. Merle's face changed, and again she seemed to find extreme difficulty in replying.

"The—the—ring is not mine," she stammered.

"Not yours?"

"I should have said it has belonged to me but a very few years—only five or six. Perhaps," looking at him furtively, "I had better tell you how it came into my possession?"

"Do so."

"It is not much of a story. A few years since I hired lodgings in a tenement-house in New York city. The woman who occupied the next room was very ill. I do not even know her name. She seemed destitute and friendless. I often watched with her, and purchased such little delicacies as she could relish. She was very grateful for my kindness. She looked like a woman with a history—I knew she had seen better days. But she never alluded to her past life. The day she died she called me to her bedside.

"God will reward your goodness to a homeless stranger," she said, with tears in her eyes, "Take this ring; it is all I have to give. It is a family jewel, but no matter; I would rather you had it than another. Take it, with my heartfelt thanks!"

"She was very weak, but she succeeded in drawing the ring from her own finger and slipping it upon mine. I have worn it ever since."

Ward heaved a sigh of bitter disappointment. Were his hopes to be dashed thus suddenly to the ground?

"Can you tell me nothing more of the stranger?" he asked eagerly.

Mrs. Merle shook her head.

"No one came to claim the body. There was nothing among her few belongings to throw any light upon her history. The landlady took possession of what she left. This poor, friendless woman might have told you all you wish to know. It was she, doubtless, who consigned you to the tender mercy of your foster-mother."

At any other time Ward might have doubted the truth of the story. He might have remembered that Mrs. Merle had evidently recognized him the moment she entered. Just now he did not; he was ill, excited, weak; his mind seemed dreamy and confused.

But Ozelma's was clear enough. The housekeeper's vivid face and expression of ill-concealed terror did not escape her observation. When she left the room, Ozelma followed her into the corridor.

"What is this mystery?" she said, abruptly.

"That clever fiction did not impose upon me. You know more of the sick man's history than you are willing to acknowledge. What is the truth?"

Mrs. Merle looked up at the beautiful girl, pale with terror; but an angry light blazed in her eyes.

"Precisely what you have heard—nothing more."

"I know better. Do not think to deceive me—I know you too well; you will not succeed. You could solve this mystery with a word!"

The pale lips flew apart in a cruel sneer.

"I understand," she said scoffingly. "You would be only too glad if I had a secret to disclose. You have fallen in love with the young man's handsome face; your infatuation has become the talk of the house. You have gone love-mad, and are sacrificing the brilliant prospects of the future for an idle delusion."

Before the other could reply, she quickly added:

"Be warned in time. I brought you here to become Lester Thornton's wife. He is your fate; do not seek to escape it. I am not one to be easily turned aside from any scheme I have undertaken."

Ozelma drew herself proudly erect.

"Neither am I," she said. "Be good enough to confine yourself to the question at issue. You can trust me. What is Ward Templeton's true history?"

"I do not know. I am as ignorant as yourself. Do not delude yourself with any foolish romance, Ozelma. Wealth and position are within your grasp. If you are wise you will not sacrifice them for an idle dream. Were the truth known, the young man's parents were no better than they should be. It is usually so. He must have been a shame to them; otherwise they would never have cast him off."

She moved hastily away, as though anxious to put an end to the conversation. A sudden impulse led Ozelma to follow, noiselessly. A few yards further on the corridor diverged sharply to the right. At this point Mrs. Merle met one of the servants.

"Where is Mr. Thornton?" she asked, an eagerness that could not be concealed in her voice.

"He left early this morning for the city."

A low exclamation of disappointment escaped her lips.

"I must see him. A matter of extreme importance. How unfortunate that he should be away! Will you let me know the moment he returns?"

"Yes," replied the man. "But he is to be absent two or three days."

Another cry of disappointment from the housekeeper. Ozelma felt like echoing it. Her very blood was on fire with anxiety and suspense. Why should Mrs. Merle be so extremely anxious to see Lester Thornton unless some secret understanding existed between the two, and she desired to tell him what had transpired?

"When that interview does take place, I must manage to be within hearing," she told herself. "Some marvelous revelations may come to light."

Controlling herself with difficulty, she re-entered the sick-chamber. But imagination was still busy. She began to analyze, as never before, what had been Lester's demeanor toward herself. The result startled her. She was positive he loved Drusilla; and yet in his treatment of herself there had been an air of proprietorship, as though their future relations were definitely settled.

"He and Mrs. Merle are playing a deep game," was her mental conclusion, "and I am only a helpless puppet in their hands. They think to fashion my course to suit their wishes. We shall see!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

THE next day Ward Templeton felt so much better he decided to return at once to Hillside. It seemed a humiliation to remain under the same roof that sheltered Drusilla, and he longed to be away.

Mr. Hastings had sent a sort of ambulance for his comfort, and the journey could be undertaken without fear of the consequences.

When the moment for parting from Ozelma came, he held the hand of the beautiful girl a long time in his clasp. Her kindness, devotion, and evident attachment to himself had woven a spell over his senses not easy to be shaken off.

"I shall miss you sadly," he said, in a trembling voice. "No patient ever had a more faithful nurse."

He saw the light fade from her eyes, the happy glow from her beautiful face.

"You are really going?" she breathed.

"I must. I could not remain here. I am sufficiently strong to return to the house of my employer. He wishes me to come."

"But what am I to do without you? Life will seem so darkened, so changed!"

The words seemed to break involuntarily from her lips.

Ward looked at her earnestly. If he had felt any doubt of her love, it was set at rest forever. She stood before him trembling with misery, her brilliant face white as death.

Here was one, he told himself, who could be true and faithful—who loved him for himself alone—who could never be turned aside by avarice, ambition, or worldly honor. Why should he not claim such a prize and cling to it forever?

The temptation was so strong he wondered at himself for putting off her trembling hands and turning away.

"We shall meet again," he said, hastily. "Not at Windymere, perhaps; I could not come here again, at least for some time. But elsewhere."

The color flowed into Ozelma's face in an angry tide as she saw him supported down the steps, and lifted into the carriage that stood waiting.

"He might have spoken one tender word," she said. "No matter. I shall win him yet. I may never be his wife, but I will have his love."

The carriage paused a moment at the avenue gate. Ward fancied he heard his own name faintly uttered and raised his head from the velvet cushion where it reposed. He caught the flutter of a white dress in the shrubbery, and Drusilla came up breathlessly and stood beside the carriage.

Was it Drusilla? For a moment he almost doubted. The young girl seemed so changed. She looked up at him with a wan, haggard face, devoid of all light and color.

"Are you so relentless?" she said in a low voice that quivered with misery. "Do you intend to go away without having forgiven me?"

His strong heart thrilled with delicious pain. There was a mad impulse to stretch out his arms and draw her close to his beating side. Deeply as she had wronged him, she had once been to him as part of himself—his very life.

Another moment, and he might have yielded. But his wandering glance happened to rest upon the gray walls of Windymere, its beautiful grounds with their waving trees, brilliant flowers, playing fountains, and long stretches of velvety emerald kissed by the golden sunlight.

For these things had Drusilla betrayed him. For these had she proved recreant to the trust reposed in her. He started back as though struck a sudden blow.

"Forgive you?" he repeated. "Never. Do not deceive yourself, or think to deceive me. You may imagine yourself truly penitent now, but the emotion would be short-lived. You are wedded to the flesh-pots of Egypt. You and I have nothing in common. There are mistakes for which nothing can atone. I trust you will never annoy me again."

They were cruel words—how cruel he did not realize until long after having uttered them. Drusilla staggered and shivered under them as though she had received a shock. The white lips opened, and some feeble words fell from them which he could not hear.

Then the carriage rolled on—he saw her no more. But the wan, white, pleading face, as he beheld it last, lingered forever afterward in his memory.

It was evening of the second day when Lester Thornton returned from the city. Standing at one of the upper windows, in the late twilight, Ozelma

saw him drive along the avenue. The sky was overcast, a wailing wind tossed the tree-tops and a few drops of rain had already fallen; it promised to be an inclement night.

Ozelma was not the only person on the watch. The instant the young man entered the hall, Mrs. Merle advanced hastily from some shadowy niche and spoke to him hurriedly.

"I must see you alone. To-night. A matter of extreme importance. How is it to be managed?"

"Hush!" Lester glanced fearfully up and down the hall, an expression of annoyance on his face.

"Come to the little room over the library," he said, after a moment's thought. "At ten o'clock. There will be no fear of interruption at that hour."

Guardedly as the words were uttered, Ozelma's quick ears caught them all. She turned away, a strange smile on her beautiful face.

She knew well the apartment to which he referred. It projected from the main body of the house onto a balcony that extended along the whole front. It had but one door, and that opened into a long, narrow hall. There was neither closet, wardrobe nor recess, no place in which one could possibly secrete himself.

Ozelma felt no dismay. Shortly before the specified time she went to her own room and put on a plain dress of noiseless black. Throwing a dark shawl over her head, she opened her window, and after listening a moment, stepped out upon the balcony.

The wind had died away—the rain was falling heavily and quietly. A light burned in the apartment where the interview was to be held. Ozelma stole noiselessly forward, and sunk upon her knees under the window, which stood a little way open.

The room was vacant at the moment, but she had scarcely taken her position when Lester entered. He looked pale and troubled, and walked restlessly up and down the floor.

"Trouble of some sort has arisen," he said aloud. "What can it be?"

He was soon to know. A soft, stealthy footstep, the rustle of a woman's dress, and Mrs. Merle came gliding up to him.

"Oh, Lester!" she uttered, and dropped her head caressingly upon his shoulder.

He drew away with an impatient frown.

"No nonsense," he said, half-angrily. "It will never do. I fancied that was understood between us."

The woman's eyes filled with sudden tears.

"There is no one to see us, Lester, no one to reveal that we have met. Surely a mother may be permitted to caress her own son?"

Ozelma started so violently as almost to betray herself. Soul! Had she heard aright? If so, her wildest conjectures had failed to reach the appalling truth. The next words Lester spoke set doubt at rest forever.

"Why did you ever reveal to me the truth?" he asked, bitterly. "I was happy in the belief that Douglas Thornton was my father—that blue blood flowed in my veins—that I had descended from a long line of illustrious ancestors. You need not have dispelled the illusion—opened my eyes to the humiliating fact that I am an impostor, and really belong to the scum of the gutter."

Mrs. Merle stretched her hand toward him with a cry of despairing pain.

"You cannot understand a mother's heart, Lester. I did not think ever to tell you. It was my purpose to grow old and die with the secret hidden in my own breast. I miscalculated my own strength. Never to clasp you in my arms, never to feel your caresses, never to hear your dear lips call me mother! Anything but that! I waited for years, until you had grown to man's estate, before making the revelation. I could not leave you to live your life wholly apart from me, and never know the mother who bore you. At first you doubted, scolded,

almost cursed me. But it is God's truth, Lester, you are not a Thornton, but my son."

"Hush!" he said, half-fearfully. "I know it, mother. I am thoroughly convinced of the truth of your assertion. Let us speak of it no more."

"No one will hear me. We are quite alone. I have been very careful. No one suspects we are even friends."

He made an impatient movement.

"Enough of that. I have permitted you to become the controlling influence of my destiny. At your request I have given up the one love of my lifetime—poor little Drusilla—and pledged myself to woo Ozelma Lorne for my wife. You seem to fancy we are certain to inherit Mrs. Severne's millions if we marry—"

"It is the only means of legalizing your own claim to them," Mrs. Merle interrupted. "If your true position were known, you would be turned in disgrace from these doors. As Ozelma's husband, no matter what happens, you will always have a right to be here."

"Would my prospects be any the less promising if I succeeded in winning Drusilla for my wife?"

Mrs. Merle smiled half-scornfully, as she answered:

"Drusilla will never marry *you*. I have studied the girl thoroughly. She is ambitious, but nothing could ever induce her to bestow her hand where her love is not already given. Ozelma might wed for wealth, position or worldly advantage; Drusilla never."

Lester's face became a shade paler. He felt the force of her words.

"We will not discuss this subject further," he said hastily. "Tell me why you wished to see me."

"You will be startled to know, but I cannot keep you in ignorance of the truth. A terrible danger menaces you, my son. The true heir of Douglas Thornton has been under this very roof!"

Lester uttered a single low cry.

"My God!" he exclaimed, and took a step forward.

"It is even so," Mrs. Merle went on, hurriedly. "In the very midst of our schemes this peril has overtaken us. I am almost desperate. It seems as though the guiding hand of God had been at work—that He intended to confound us, and cause the right to prevail. Mere chance could never have brought about such a strange complication."

Lester was not listening. He had heard but a single sentence.

"Is it possible you can mean Ward Templeton?" he asked, after a pause.

"Yes. In my wildest conjectures I never dreamed he could ever cross my path again. I did not even know what had become of him. When a tiny, feeble infant, I stole him from the side of his dead mother, whose nurse I had been, substituting you, my own child, in his place. I gave him to a strange lady I met accidentally in New York. I did not inquire her name or destination—I wished to remain in ignorance of them. And now, after all these years and the precautions taken, he has reappeared, and under this roof, of all others. It is wonderful—it is appalling!"

She hid her face in her hands, and wept aloud for fear and grief.

Lester, too, seemed overwhelmed. Were all his schemes to come to such utter bankruptcy? Ruin and exposure stared him in the face.

"Does *he* know?" he hoarsely uttered.

"Not yet. But his resemblance to Douglas Thornton, his dead father, is striking. I am surprised it has not been noticed and commented upon already."

Lester had been struck by something familiar in Ward's expression the first time he saw him. Now he realized why it was so.

Ozelma lingered to hear no more. The rain had been falling all the while. Her dress was wet through with it, and her long, black hair fell about her, dripping with moisture. Leaving her cramped

position under the window, she stole cautiously along the balcony and re-entered her chamber.

She trembled violently. The wet shawl slipped from her shoulders in a tumbled heap. She walked up and down the room with fierce, rapid steps, her hands clinched, her beautiful face flushing and paling.

Her joy and relief were unbounded. It seemed as though Heaven had interposed in her behalf. Now she could let loose the reins of love, and revel in its delicious madness.

Ward was no longer a poor secretary—a nameless adventurer. Her heart had been wiser than her intellect. It had recognized the true heir of the Thorntons at sight, and bowed in allegiance before him.

But what was she to do?

The first impulse was to go instantly to Mrs. Severne's room, and tell her of the startling discovery. But she resisted it. The old woman would certainly use her influence to bring about a reconciliation between Drusilla and Ward—her own hopes would be blasted forever.

Then she thought of communicating with the young man himself. He would certainly feel grateful to the person who first brought to him such welcome intelligence. He was interested in her already—and gratitude is akin to love.

Finally, as she grew calmer, the resolution came to wait for further developments and possess her soul with patience.

"I can endure a little delay," she told herself, "now that Ward is so nearly won."

CHAPTER XIV. WILL-MAKING.

THE following morning, as she stepped into the corridor after having passed a sleepless night, Ozelma was confronted by Peters, Mrs. Severne's maid. The woman looked grave and troubled.

"My lady has not risen yet," she said. "She seems ill and feverish. I wish you would go to her, please."

Ozelma had only to cross the corridor and the small ante-room beyond. Mrs. Severne's spacious chamber had a window looking to the east: the risen sun was struggling through broken rifts of cloud, and dropping its golden kisses upon the fair, dripping earth. Some of its glory and radiance stole like a benediction into the beautiful room.

Ozelma started as she saw the white, convulsed face of old Margaret. It did not seem possible a few hours of illness had wrought such havoc. Her eyes were sunken, her lips bloodless, she was weak as a child, and a strange gray pallor had settled over her wrinkled features.

"I did not expect to find you like this, aunt Severne. Has the doctor been summoned?"

"Doctor?" echoed the old woman, sharply. "Don't you dare bring one here. What do I want of a doctor?"

"You are very ill."

"Nonsense. You can't frighten me. It is only a slight giddiness. I shall be all right in a few hours. A doctor would be sure to make me ill."

"May I remain to nurse you?"

The sunken eyes studied her beautiful face attentively a moment.

"If you wish," was the ungracious answer. "But it is unnecessary. I shall get along quite as well without you."

Ozelma drew a chair to the bedside. Dipping her handkerchief in rose-water, she bathed the hot brow of the sufferer. Scarcely a word was spoken. The girl seemed profoundly buried in her own thoughts, and Mrs. Severne lay perfectly quiet, only unclosing her eyes now and then.

It was a word or two of delirium that first frightened Ozelma. Old Margaret might die! She stood up trembling, utterly overwhelmed by the thought.

"Aunt Severne, have you made your will?" she asked, suddenly.

The sick woman looked at her with a cunning leer. "Of course you would like to know. You wonder what is to become of my riches when I am done with them. But it is not best to alarm oneself. I shall not die this time. I shall live long enough to make a dozen wills, and revoke them all."

"Life is uncertain."

"Tell me something new, or hold your tongue," was the sharp retort. "I shall not give my money away while I want it myself."

Ozelma made no response. Resuming her seat, she continued to bathe the old woman's brow and temples. But she was inwardly trembling. The gray look that had settled upon the harsh features filled her with foreboding terror. That expression often came to one stricken by death, she had been told.

"She must not die," Ozelma said to herself. "Her worldly affairs have not been set in order. I know no will has been made since I came to Windymere. Her millions might go to strangers were she to die without a new one."

It was impossible to control her quivering nerves. She was terribly dismayed by the thought of the danger that menaced. She was tempted to disclose at once the startling discovery she had made.

"It would rouse her to the necessity for action to learn that she is being imposed upon, and Ward, not Lester, is the true Thornton."

Poor Ozelma! Her heart wrung by conflicting emotions, she longed to make the revelation, but dared not.

What if Mrs. Severne should send for Ward, call Drusilla in, and insist upon an immediate marriage in her presence? She was just capricious enough to do it.

"No," she told herself, "I will keep the secret a little longer."

Old Margaret was watching her keenly from under her drooping lashes.

"Of course you expect me to leave you something handsome, Ozelma," she said, with characteristic abruptness.

"I have never thought much of the matter—"

"No lies," came the sharp interruption. "What is the use? Do you expect to be remembered, or do you not?"

"I hope to be, aunt Severne. I am a relative and have some claim upon you."

"Claim? Fiddlesticks. That for any so-called claim," snapping her fingers contemptuously. "My money will never be doled out in pittances. Whoever gets a part will get all."

A brief silence ensued. Ozelma could not trust herself to speak. The old woman suddenly broke it:

"I am not such a fool as you think me," she cried, looking frightfully cunning and malicious. "I see through your plots and plans. It is a cunning game you are playing, but you will not succeed. You are setting a trap to marry Lester that you may share my money between you. But he prefers Drusilla. So do I. You cannot win him away from her."

Ozelma's heart, which had beat to the verge of suffocation as Mrs. Severne began to speak, grew calm again.

"You are mistaken," she said, quietly. "I have no designs upon Lester. Nothing could ever induce me to become his wife."

"Humph. Well, I did not expect to hear the truth from your lips. But I have been watching you. You were ready to throw yourself at his feet the moment you entered the house. Not that you love him—you do not. But you love wealth and position."

As there was no response she continued:

"You have played a part from the first, Ozelma Lorne. You made quite a sensational entree upon the scene. But I understood it. You lied to me about that maize-colored brocade—Judith's dress—you had on. You claimed to have found it among your belongings. Bah! It was stolen from this

house! I saw it in one of the attic wardrobes only two weeks before!"

Ozelma grew deadly pale. And so the old woman knew even this. She scarcely breathed for a few moments.

"There is a traitor in the house, some one in league with you," Mrs. Severne added, half raising herself in bed. "Who is it? I have tried to find out, but in vain."

The limits of the girl's endurance were reached. She could bear no more. When the bony, feverish hands attempted to grasp her own, she drew back abruptly and fled from the room.

Drusilla was standing beside the large oriel window near the landing. Ozelma paused, glancing at her curiously. She could not help being struck by the utter misery expressed in the pale, beautiful face. She and Drusilla had never fancied each other, but now, after hesitating an instant, she went up to her.

"Aunt Severne is ill," she said. "Dangerously so, I fear. Will you not persuade her to see a physician? She refuses to listen to me."

"Ill?" Drusilla's apathy vanished instantly. She took a step forward. "I did not know. I shall take the responsibility of calling in medical advice immediately. Then I will tell her what I have done."

Ozelma gazed after her as she moved away. This promptness of action surprised her. She had looked upon Drusilla as a simple, loving girl, scarcely equal to an emergency. But she was showing herself brave and resolute, even taking up a responsibility from which she, Ozelma, had shrunk.

The day wore slowly on. The doctor came in due time, and Mrs. Severne relented so far as to see him. Drusilla took him to her chamber.

"There is no real danger," he announced. "A little fever, the result of a sudden cold. A few hours will work a complete restoration."

Mrs. Severne saw him alone for a few moments, and sent a message by him when he went away. Nobody knew what, until, an hour later, a lawyer and his two assistants unexpectedly appeared, asking to be conducted to her chamber.

There was a long conference. Ozelma hovered about the door, hoping to catch a word or two that would inform her what was transpiring within. In vain. Once one of the assistants looked into the hall; she caught a glimpse of the lawyer seated at a table, busily engaged in writing—then the door closed again.

Twilight was falling, the men had been gone some hours when she ventured to enter the chamber. Mrs. Severne looked up from the pillow, a malicious smile distorting her face.

"You dropped a chance suggestion, and I have followed it," she said smoothly. "My will has been drawn up, and duly signed."

Ozelma drew a long, deep breath. But she did not speak.

"Peters has put it carefully away for me—locked it in the tower cabinet, where my other papers are kept," the old woman added. "There it will be until I am dead and gone."

Ozelma waited breathlessly for some hint as to its purport. None was given. Old Margaret seemed to understand how heartfully she was racked with anxiety and impotence. She smiled, showing her toothless jaws, and turned upon the pillow without another word.

"I must know—I will!" Ozelma thought, clasping her trembling hands. "I cannot take a single step in the dark."

CHAPTER XV.

A BRIDGE OF GLASS.

MRS. SEVERNE felt so much better in the evening she was able to sit up for an hour or more. Promptly at ten o'clock she sent everybody from the room—not even Peters was suffered to remain.

"I will not be coddled," she declared. "I am almost well, and can ring if anything is wanted. I

should not sleep a wink with any one sitting in the room."

Ozelma went away with the rest. But not to rest. She could not banish the will from her thoughts for a moment. Rest was out of the question while she remained ignorant as to what he had to expect. She had seen the cabinet in the tower a score of times, at least, and knew that Old Margaret slept with the key under her pillow.

"Why should I not examine it for myself?" she said. "I think it could be done. I will!"

It was long past midnight before she made a single movement. The house had been quiet for hours. At last with quick, noiseless steps she stole across the corridor, and entered Mrs. Severne's chamber. A lamp burned dimly beside the bed. Its light fell upon the old woman's face. The sunken eyes were closed, the mouth half-open, and she was breathing heavily.

"Sound asleep," thought Ozelma.

With a quick, shuddering gesture she withdrew the bunch of keys from under the pillow. The thought came what if old Margaret should awake and miss them during her absence! It was a fearful risk, but she could do no less than incur it.

With noiseless, unflinching steps she made her way to the tower. It was the most ancient portion of the house—a square, ponderous affair built of gray stone, and but seldom entered. Here, at the top of three flights of stairs, was a narrow landing where Mrs. Severne capriciously chose to keep the cabinet in question—a quaint, old-fashioned affair made of oak and bound with brass.

Selecting by instinct the key that fitted the lock, Ozelma turned it noiselessly. The first paper she saw was the one of which she had dreamed so often. It lay at the top, simply taken out of its cover. An other moment and she had slipped down the lamp with which she had provided herself, and was eagerly devouring its contents.

She was too astute to notice the exact wording of the document. But its purport was perfectly clear to her. With the exception of a few unimportant bequests, Mrs. Severne had bequeathed the whole of her immense fortune to "the only son and heir of the late Douglas Thornton."

That is the way it read, "only son and heir of the late Douglas Thornton." Lester was not mentioned by name. The capricious woman had decided that he should be designated in this way.

The only reference to Drusilla or Ozelma was in a paragraph toward the close of the will.

"My heir will marry one or the other," it said, "and I wish him to take his choice. In the event that he decides to pass them both by for a stranger, one hundred thousand dollars is to be divided equally between Drusilla and Ozelma."

The words seemed to blur before the eyes that were devouring them so eagerly. Who shall say what enchanting pictures floated before the girl's mental vision?

Suddenly there came a soft, rustling noise—the sound of hurried breathing. Ozelma looked up with a thrill of awful terror. There, close beside her stood old Margaret, a dressing-gown of quilted silk drawn about her shrunken figure, an expression of rage, fury and menace blazing in her bleared old eyes.

"You!" she gasped, in a hoarse, suffocating voice. "Fiend! you beautiful devil! How dare you come here like this?"

Ozelma was never fully able to tell how it happened; but the furious woman made a sudden dash upon her, then fell heavily back against the wall. It was old, nearly rotted, and gave way instantly under her weight. Mrs. Severne, as she felt herself falling, made a single frantic effort to regain her footing. An expression of awful horror and entreaty flashed for one second from her dilated eyes. There was an unearthly shriek, the briefest possible silence, then a dull thud as the body struck the paved floor below.

Ozelma had sufficient sense left to thrust the will into the cabinet. She dared not look at the dark, shapeless mass on the stone flagging below. The awful silence alone told her what to expect. Drawing her garments out of the way, she fled swiftly to her chamber and shut herself in.

For a moment she stood in the center of the room, dazed, bewildered, lost. One cry escaped her lips:

"My God! this is too dreadful!"

By this time voices and footsteps were to be heard. The whole household had been aroused by that blood-curdling cry. The necessity for immediate action recalled Ozelma to herself.

With trembling hands she loosened her rich, abundant hair, and tore off the dinner-dress of garnet silk she had worn during the previous day, tossing it in a rumpled heap on the wardrobe floor.

When one of the maids knocked at the door presently, though her face was deadly pale and her eyes glittered, she was quite calm.

"What has happened?" she asked. "Why this commotion?"

"Oh, my poor mistress!" moaned the girl, with a shuddering glance over her shoulder.

"Is she worse?" Ozelma compelled herself to inquire.

"She is dead!"

Ozelma shrieked the word after her. It was a relief to give expression in some way to her overwrought feelings. Following in the direction others were taking, she soon found herself in the presence of the dead woman.

Kind hands had raised the poor, bruised body and laid it upon a couch. Ozelma joined the group gathered about it, but she could not persuade herself to look at the ghastly spectacle. Her terrified gaze rested upon anything and everything but that.

Pale, rigid, beautiful, she stood there with clasped hands, her long purplish-black hair falling in confusion over the white dressing-gown she had thrown hastily about her.

"It can't be true!" she faltered. "My dear old aunt! Some one must fetch a surgeon instantly."

One of the servants had already gone. Turning to Drusilla, who stood trembling and tearful beside her, she said, shudderingly:

"Of course, it was an accident. Pray, tell me how it happened."

Two theories were already being whispered about. Some thought the ill-fated woman had been walking in her sleep, while others were of the opinion that she had climbed the tower stairs for the purpose of securing some paper in the cabinet—possibly the will so recently made—and had fainted and fallen against the railing and been precipitated to the floor below.

In support of this latter theory, the keys were found sticking in the lock.

Peters stood beside the couch, rocking herself to and fro and wringing her hands distractedly. She could not forgive herself for having been comfortably reposing in bed while so terrible an accident had happened.

"Oh, my poor, poor mistress!" she wailed. "Why did you send me away? This would never have occurred had you permitted me to watch beside you."

The surgeon arrived presently. But of course nothing could be done. It had been a mere farce sending for him. Margaret Severne had looked her last upon the world.

Ozelma was hurrying back to her room when Mrs. Merle stole up softly behind her and touched her arm. The woman's face was pale and agitated.

"The will?" she uttered in a panting whisper. "Do you know its purport? Did Mrs. Severne tell you anything?"

There was a scarcely perceptible pause. Ozelma

saw the necessity of setting the woman's mind at rest; otherwise she might make mischief.

"You have nothing to fear," she said. "Everything is left to Douglas Thornton's son."

Mrs. Merle drew a long breath of relief. At another time she might have thought the answer peculiarly worded; but now she failed to notice any strangeness in it. Of course Lester was the person intended.

Having gained the refuge of her own apartment, Ozelma threw herself face downward upon the couch. At last, at last, she was alone and had time to think—to face the shock and horror of the situation.

In one sense it was an hour of triumph.

The dead woman's millions would be Ward Templeton's—he was Douglas Thornton's son. Love and fate had both been kind. She might win the man to whom her heart was given and not be compelled to give up the fortune she coveted.

Then another thought came—one that curled her blood and made her flesh creep.

But for her, Margaret Severne would still be alive! She would never have gone to her death at that midnight hour but for Ozelma's treachery and cupidity.

"I did not murder her in cold blood," the girl said to herself shudderingly, "but the sin of her awful death lies at my door all the same."

She tried to banish the thought, but in vain. Claspings both hands before her eyes, she buried her face in the pillows. It was of no use. That livid, horrified face as she last beheld it, sinking into the gulf of impenetrable blackness that made the lower portion of the tower seem so horrible, rose constantly before her mental vision.

"I shall be haunted by it as long as I live," she cried despairingly.

It was a relief to see the gray light of early dawn steal slowly into the chamber, and hear the first twitter of the birds outside.

Ozelma scarcely knew how the day passed. Like one in a dream she heard the undertaker's assistants come and go; the solemn, subdued hurrying to and fro that sounds so strangely in the house where death has entered.

She was trying to decide upon a plan of action. She stood upon a bridge of glass—nothing was certain until she had won Ward Templeton for her husband.

Shortly after mid-day she rose, and wrote a few hasty words to Ward.

"I must see you. What I have to say concerns yourself, and no one else must hear it. I have made a strange discovery. Will you meet me at twilight this evening, at the little hut in the fir-grove midway between Hillside and Windymere? OZELMA LORNE."

"That will bring him if he is able to leave the house," she thought, as she folded and sealed the note.

She dispatched it by a special messenger. The answer came in due season. It consisted of a single line.

"I will be at the appointed place."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HUT.

The sun was sinking in a bank of purple-black clouds when Ozelma left the house. A strange, copper-colored light shone in the sky, a sickly yellow glare had fallen upon the emerald fields, the swelling hills and green, winding lanes. Not a breath of air rustled the foliage, every leaf was still. Even the birds had forgotten to sing.

Ozelma walked rapidly, buried in her own thoughts. Just as she came in sight of the hut where the interview was to be held, a low rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. It had no other effect than to quicken her fleet steps.

The hut had been built by some laborers in a quarry near by, and recently abandoned. It was a poor

affair, roughly flung together. The rude door stood ajar, and Ozelma entered unhesitatingly.

Profound stillness reigned in the place. At first the girl fancied herself quite alone. Her brows knitted in an impatient frown as she glanced round the single room. Only a few wooden stools, a table with three legs, a small cupboard nailed against the wall, and—

With a sudden cry she sprung forward. Surely she recognized the outlines of a human figure lying upon a couch of leaves in the darkest corner of the hut! Instantly she was bending over it. The handsome face turned up to the light was very pale and still.

"My God! Ward, himself! He is dead!"

A moment she stood as if paralyzed. It was a terrible shock. Then fancying she detected some slight movement in the ghastly figure, she gazed round the room in an agony of terror. Oh, if she had only some powerful restorative at hand!

She flew to the cupboard, and wrenched open the door. A black bottle stood on the lower shelf. She knew by the odor it had contained brandy, and a few drops still remained in the bottom.

"Thank God!" she cried aloud.

Raising the young man's head, she poured the liquor down his throat. It had an instantaneous effect. He drew a long, deep breath, and opened his eyes. As they rested on the beautiful, luring face so near his own, he seemed to forget himself for a moment.

"Am I still at Windymere? and are you sacrificing yourself to me, like an angel of mercy?"

Before she could reply, his mind cleared, and he remembered what had happened.

"I came here to meet you," he said. "I was not strong enough for so long a walk. I sunk down on these leaves and fainted from exhaustion."

Ozelma looked at him remorsefully, her beautiful eyes filling with tears.

"I shall never be able to forgive myself if you are made ill again through me."

"I seem to forget all pain, now that you are here beside me."

Ozelma started. The blood seemed to leap in a burning torrent through her veins. What did he mean? Was her deep, passionate love at last to find reward?

Bending still lower, she said in an eager whisper:

"Do you really care for me a little?"

"You know I do."

Her superb beauty, the passion burning in her eyes, the warm touch of her fingers, her fragrant breath as it fanned his cheek, seemed to kindle a responsive ardor in his veins.

"Would God I had met you sooner!" he exclaimed. "I might have given you all my heart—worshiped you as a queen among women."

"I will not pretend to misunderstand you," she said, trembling. "Drusilla Dreeme stands between us. You cannot fight her."

"No," he said, sighing heavily. "I have tried in vain. I know she is unworthy, and yet, at this very moment I love her as madly as ever."

Ozelma lowered her long-lashed lids to hide the angry sparkle in her eyes.

"It is sad that Drusilla should have so wrecked your life and trust," she murmured, in soft, dulcet tones. "But there are other women in the world, Ward, those who are constant and true, who would sooner die than cause you pain or disappointment."

"I know," he sighed, and pressed the hand resting in his own. But he paused with these words.

Ozelma was almost frantic. She *must* succeed! Everything she prized was at stake. Turning her luring eyes again upon him, she gently said:

"Did you never think the surest way of driving an unworthy love from your heart is to replace it with another?"

He shook his head sadly.

"The experiment might not succeed. In that case two persons would be made miserable."

"Do you love Drusilla so very much?"

"Better than my own life. I shall love her always."

A cry broke from Ozelma's lips. It was full of impotent rage, but the young man heard in it only the expression of a profound sorrow.

"My poor friend," he said, looking up at her earnestly, "I can understand how such a confession must pain you. But I must be frank and outspoken. You have my esteem, my deep regard. But my heart is given to another."

"Your friendship is more precious to me than another man's love," Ozelma answered, faintly.

Still silent! There was one last chord that might be touched, and she made the attempt.

"You have well said that Drusilla is unworthy," she breathed. "In all my experience I have never met with a young girl so selfish or avaricious. She has penitence moods when her heartless conduct appears to her in its true light. But these soon pass. Do you know what she has done?"

Ward started and trembled, but made no response.

"She has betrothed herself to Lester Thornton. She would sell her own soul to be mistress of the Severne million. Wealth and position are more to her than anything else in the world. Aunt Severne approved the alliance, you know; they were to have been married within a month."

The falsehood fell glibly from her lips. But Ward looked up in sudden doubt and consternation.

"Are you sure?" he hoarsely said.

"Oh, yes. Drusilla was my informant. She seemed quite elated over her good fortune."

The young man lay silent and thoughtful. Drusilla's pale, sad face, so full of heart-break and suffering, as she had stood at the avenue gate, rose before his mental vision. Had she so soon forgotten him? She would soon be another man's wife. Then it would be a sin to think of her so constantly. These galling chains must be broken at whatever cost.

"Ozelma," he said abruptly, "you know all the truth, that I have but the remnant of a heart to offer. Will you be my wife?"

She leaned nearer, with a hard-drawn breath.

"Do you mean it, Ward?"

"Yes. I will endeavor to make you happy. I cannot give the love that is your due, but I will be a true and devoted husband."

The shadows had grown dense in the little hut. He could no longer see her face. But her hoarse, panting breathing was audible. Suddenly she gathered his two hands into her own, and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"You have made me happy already," she murmured in low, passionate tones. "I can imagine no bliss comparable with that of becoming your wife. I need no longer even attempt to hide my heart. I love you, Ward, I love you."

He made no immediate response. Her passion awed and half-frightened him. A vague feeling of foreboding was upon him, and could not be shaken off.

"We cannot hope to be married for several years, at least," he said at length. "I am a poor man, with my way to make in the world. I shall resign my position as Mr. Hastings's secretary, and resume the practice of my profession. It is no enviable lot you have chosen. Years of patient waiting may be necessary."

Ozelma smiled to herself. Years! He little divined what was passing in her heart.

At that moment a vivid flash of lightning illumined the hut with the brilliancy of noonday. A deafening peal of thunder followed. A few great drops of rain pattered against the one small window, and after a moment's cessation came pouring down in torrents as though the flood-gates of heaven had been opened.

Ward raised his head with a faint exclamation of dismay.

"I am very sorry," he said. "I did not know that a tempest was rising. Now you must remain in this wretched place until it is over."

Ozelma smiled again, half-seornfully.

"That will be no hardship—you are with me."

On entering the hut she had noticed a lamp and matches on the deal shelf, opposite the door. She struck a light, then resumed her seat beside the rude couch on which Ward was reclining.

"You have not inquired why I asked you to meet me here," she said, abruptly.

"No." She noticed that his lips were pale and twitched nervously. "You have made a discovery that concerns myself, I think you said."

"Yes, dear Ward. Be prepared for a startling revelation. I have learned the secret of your parentage."

A stifled cry broke from his parted lips; but he lay motionless, gazing at her with growing wonder, as she related the strange series of events that had led to the surprising discovery.

"It is marvelous—almost incredible!" he cried in a hoarse, deep voice. "God works in a mysterious way. He brought me here for a purpose. I am really and truly Douglas Thornton's son, one of Mrs. Severne's heirs?"

"There can be no doubt of it," Ozelma replied. "The proof is ample. Mrs. Merle's confession alone would suffice to establish your rights."

She had not told him the purport of the new will. Of course it would not answer to let him know that she was acquainted with its contents.

The young man arose at length, and walked restlessly up and down the hut. The startling revelation had inspired him with new life, and energy.

The thunder still crashed and reverberated overhead, the vivid lightning played across his face, the rain continued to fall in torrents, but he was blind and deaf to it all.

He did not even see the flushed, beautiful face with its burning eyes and quivering lips that was turned so eagerly toward him from the opposite side of the little room.

CHAPTER XVII.

A HASTY MARRIAGE.

WARD's first thoughts were of Drusilla. His heart turned toward her with passionate pain and longing. Of all women in the world, she was the one he should have made his bride.

"Why did she not remain true and faithful?" he asked himself. "We might have been so happy. Heaven was paving the way. Now it is forever too late. She is bound to another and so am I."

A bitter groan broke from his lips. Ozelma started up hastily, and touched his arm.

"Of what are you thinking, Ward? I fancied the news I brought would give unmixed joy and satisfaction."

"Forgive me," he said, sinking heavily upon one of the rude stools. "I do not wish to seem ungrateful. But—"

Pausing abruptly, he buried his face in his hands. Ozelma grew deadly pale as she looked at him. Sinking suddenly at his feet, she clung to his languid hands.

"You frighten me!" she cried. "I can never give you up, Ward. This revelation must make no difference in our relations to each other."

"Do not fear—it never shall."

His thoughts, even as he spoke, were with Drusilla! His changed prospects afforded him very little satisfaction after all. As often happens with regard to the blessings of this world, his good fortune had come too late.

The hours wore on, and the tempest continued to rage unabated. A mist lay over the young man's thoughts; he sat motionless as the night waned, half-stupefied and bewildered.

When at length he aroused himself, and looked at his watch, it was long past midnight.

"You will be compelled to remain here until

morning, Ozelma," he said, in a troubled tone. "It would be unsafe to venture out into the storm and darkness."

She did not reply. She had withdrawn to the other end of the hut, and sat with her face averted. After gazing at her a moment, Ward dropped his head with a heavy sigh.

The faint gray dawn, when at length it stole feebly into the hut through broken rifts of cloud, found them still sitting in the same position. For hours no word had passed between them—they had scarcely stirred.

The rain was over. The sun as it rolled above the eastern hills, looked down upon a landscape "drowned in tears."

Ward rose, stiff and bewildered. The long, long night seemed like a frightful dream. He stood at the door of the hut, looking out upon the wet, sodden ground where the rain-drops glistened like diamonds, wondering if it could indeed be a reality.

A soft, warm hand stole into his own. Ozelma was standing close beside him, an expression of piteous entreaty in her beautiful eyes.

"What a fair, sweet world," she said, gently. "It never looked to me half so lovely."

Ward breathed a sigh. It was her new-found happiness that made it seem so beautiful.

"I will go for a carriage," he said, at length, "and take you home to Windymere."

Greatly to his surprise and distress, she leaned her head against his shoulder, and burst into tears.

"Not there," she sobbed. "Oh, Ward, how can I ever go back to my friends again? What shall I say to them when they ask, as they are sure to do, where I have been?"

And she wept more unrestrainedly than before.

His handsome face flushed. A pure, honorable man, he had never thought of the situation in any other light than its unpleasantness. But Ozelma's words recalled him to a realizing sense of what the censorious world was likely to say.

The rich color faded suddenly, leaving him paler than before. He took a moment for reflection; then his decision was made.

"You shall be my wife now—this very day," he said, in a trembling voice. "No one shall be given the opportunity to speak evil of you."

Her face was still hidden, he did not see the gleam of triumph that sparkled in her eyes. The contemplated marriage seemed more and more repugnant to him. But Ozelma must not suffer. Even the strongest men have been conquered by woman's wiles.

A few moments later a wagon came rattling along the road. A plain farmer on his way to market. Ward hailed him, and easily succeeded in gaining conveyance for himself and companion to the nearest town.

It was a strange bridal journey—one that neither ever forgot.

A license and ring were procured; and two hours later the solemn words were spoken that bound these two together for time and eternity.

Ozelma could not conceal her joy and exultation. It sparkled in her velvety eyes, shone in her beautiful face. Ward felt his pulses throb as he gazed at her.

"You are very lovely," he said. "I shall be proud of my beautiful wife."

"You will love her too, after a little, even as she loves you," Ozelma whispered, touching her fragrant lips to his forehead.

His eyes fell, and he thought of Drusilla. Could he ever forget her?

A hired carriage was procured, and they set out upon the return journey. Ozelma had become silent and thoughtful. She was maturing her plans. The goal of her ambition was reached—she had won wealth, position, the man she loved—but it was still necessary to proceed with extreme caution.

Suddenly wreathing her soft arms caressingly about his neck, she said.

"I have a favor to ask, Ward. It will be better, after all, for me to return to Windymere alone. I can offer some explanation that will account for my absence. Are you willing, for my sake, to keep our secret for a few days?"

"You really wish it?" he said in a tone of deep surprise.

"Yes. It would seem so dreadful to go back while aunt Severne lies in the house a corpse, and tell everybody I am a new-made bride." A real shudder shook her frame. "No, let us wait until after the funeral before making our marriage public. You do not mind?"

"Not if you wish to keep the secret."

She smiled gratefully into his face.

"I will leave you at Hillside, and continue the journey alone. You are to say nothing to Mr. Hastings or any one of the change in your prospects. When the right moment arrives to declare the truth, I will send for you."

She had her wish in this matter as in all things else. Ward felt in no haste to claim his newly-made bride. The burden of heaviness still clung about his heart, and with a few hurried words of farewell they parted.

The first person Ozelma met on entering the house was Mrs. Merle. The housekeeper was giving instructions to one of the maids, but she instantly came forward, her pale face flushed with distrust and suspicion.

"You remained away all night," she said sharply.

"Where were you?"

"With a friend," giving her head a haughty toss.

"Friend?" scornfully repeating the word. "How many friends have you made in this neighborhood during your brief sojourn here, I would like to ask?"

As there was no response, the woman added in a lower tone:

"I give you fair warning. You must have no secrets from me. Do not be led away by any folly. I have been a good friend to you, but I should make a relentless enemy."

Ozelma only smiled disdainfully, and passed on. She comprehended the woman's meaning perfectly. The words were intended as a warning that she might yet step between her and the fortune she coveted.

"Fool!" Ozelma said to herself. "It is you who must humble yourself to me. At last I am able to defy your power."

Lester stood in the reception-room, a lowering frown on his brow, an angry shadow in his eyes. He had learned from his mother's lips, the purport of Mrs. Severne's will; and feeling secure in his false position as Douglas Thornton's supposed son, had that morning suddenly decided to act upon his own responsibility.

The Severne millions would be his—why hamper himself with a bride he did not love? Drusilla's girlish, innocent beauty had won all his heart. Of course when he took his position as heir to an immense fortune she would be only too glad to marry him.

Meeting her accidentally a few moments before, he had declared his passion in a few burning words. Drusilla did not wait to hear him through, but broke from him with a cry of fear and aversion.

"Do not speak to me like this," she cried. "I will not listen."

"One moment," he entreated, following her. "You do not realize what a golden opportunity you are throwing away. Let me tell you a secret. Mrs. Severne's millions will be mine. As my wife you would be mistress of Windymere, and share the immense fortune she has left."

She turned upon him like lightning, her beautiful eyes blazing.

"Do you think to buy my love? If so, you have mistaken me. Nothing could ever induce me to become your wife."

And she had fled from him in evident terror.

He was still smarting under the pain and fury con-

sequent upon his rejection when Ozelma had entered the reception-room. After a moment's hesitation, he turned toward her, his pale lips working convulsively.

She was like a queen. No man ever claimed a more beautiful bride. She would make a royal mistress for Windymere. Drusilla should never know how her scorn had hurt him. He would yield to his mother's wishes, and make Ozelma his wife. Drusilla would be fitly punished when she beheld them rolling in wealth in which she could have no share.

Clasping Ozelma's hand, he said abruptly:

"I think we understand each other. It is down in the books that you and I should unite our fortunes. You came here to win the heir of Windymere, and I am ready to fall at your feet. When shall it be?"

Drawing her hand quickly from his clasp, she transfixed him with her glance of haughty scorn.

"Nether, Lester Thornton. Do not delude yourself with any false hopes. I have my own plans for the future. I shall never be your wife."

And she swept on, her superb head thrown back, her eyes flashing, leaving the disappointed man in a stupor of amazement and incredulity.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CHAPTER OF SURPRISES.

THREE days later, all that was mortal of poor Margaret Severne was consigned to the cold silence of the tomb.

It was a stately funeral, largely attended. No one thought strange of seeing the carriage from Hillside following closely after the mourners in the procession. Mr. Hastings had been the most intimate friend of the deceased, and it was natural that he should wish to go to the grave.

His handsome young secretary was with him, but of course the latter went simply for company's sake.

After the mourners had returned to the house, a series of surprises occurred. The first was when Mrs. Merle, in her plain black dress and mourning cap, unexpectedly encountered a portly, florid-looking man of sixty in one of the lower halls.

As she recognized him, a sharp cry of surprise and fear broke from her lips, and she raised her hands as if to ward off a blow.

"Dr. Lynde!"

The man bowed and smiled. He had been medical attendant to the Thorntons for many years; in fact it was at their house Mrs. Merle had met him while she was acting as Mrs. Thornton's nurse more than twenty years before.

"It is a long while since we have met," said the good doctor, "but I remember you perfectly."

"What brings you here at the present time?" the startled woman demanded.

"I had some acquaintance with Mrs. Severne, and wished to pay respect to her memory."

The answer sounded like an excuse. Mrs. Merle's heart beat with heavy throbs. Before she could compose herself to question him further, Dr. Lynde had passed on.

But she felt terribly frightened. It was very strange that he should be there. A presentiment of coming evil weighed heavily upon her. She would have felt even more terrified had she been aware that Ozelma had been instrumental in bringing him to Windymere.

The would-be heir was the next person to be profoundly startled. Lester had just been up-stairs to readjust his mourning attire, and was on his way to the library where the will of the deceased was to be read, when he came face to face with Ward Templeton.

He fell back, his features taking on a deathly hue. There certainly was something ominous in the appearance of the true heir at such a time and place. He tried in vain to conceal the terror that chilled his blood, and well-nigh stopped the beating of his heart.

"You?" he sharply exclaimed. "Tell me what brings you here?"

Ward met his angry gaze unshrinkingly.

"I was invited to be present at the reading of the will," he replied.

It was true. Ozelma had sent for him, and given instructions how he was to proceed.

Lester trembled with vague apprehension.

"There must be some mistake. Aunt Severne was almost a stranger to you. What possible interest can you have in her will?"

"That remains to be seen."

Resolved to avoid all discussion with the impostor Ward turned hastily aside, and entered one of the small reception-rooms near at hand. As he closed the door and shut himself in, a faint gasping sound, that was neither sigh nor moan but a blending of both, startled him, and he looked around.

Drusilla was standing there in the middle of the room, her rigid hands clasped and extended toward him, her white, quivering face full of unutterable anguish.

For a moment he could not move or speak, but stood gazing at her like one fascinated, thrills of delicious pain tingling through every nerve.

"Listen to me a moment, Ward," she cried, taking a single step forward. "You have been unjust—cruelly misjudged me! I must make one last effort to set you right."

The lovely face, the sad, passionate voice, moved him as none other could have done. He lunged to open his arms and take her to his heart.

"You know what my life was before coming here—how barren and dreary. Surely you might show pity, forbearance. I freely acknowledge my own weakness and the strength of the temptation that assailed me. I was so tired of poverty and privation! But my heart has never wandered from its allegiance to you—never for one moment."

He still stood silent and motionless. All power of speech was gone from him.

"Have you nothing to say to me, Ward—not one word?" she cried, tears raining from her lovely eyes. "It is very hard. I would have forgiven you a far greater wrong than that of which I have been guilty."

His heart smote him as he gazed. How haggard, pallid and changed she looked, like one who has passed through the deep valley of humiliation. Only the shadow of her fair, sweet loveliness remained. Had she indeed suffered so much? Perhaps he *had* been too hard and unrelenting.

Raising her clasped hands, she went on, passionately:

"The riches and honors of this world no longer have the least temptation for me. I hate them. Better the old life of toil and self-denial, for that gave peace and happiness. I might be mistress of Windymere; but—I never shall."

He took a step near, and spoke at last.

"You might be mistress of Windymere?" he slowly repeated.

A crimson flush suffused her pale face.

"Yes. Lester Thornton is to be the heir. He has asked me to marry him; but I—I—have refused him."

Ward uttered a cry of astonishment. An uncomfortable suspicion that Ozelma had deceived him flashed for the first time upon his mind.

"I fancied the matter was fully settled," he faltered; "that the marriage would speedily follow."

"It was a mistake," she replied. "I never had the least intention of becoming Lester's wife. I do not love him, and I will never marry for money or position."

There was no time to say more. At this moment the lawyer who had drawn up the will came to the door in search of Drusilla. All was in readiness, he briefly announced, and the three entered the library together.

Mrs. Merle, Lester and Ozelma were already there. So also were the family servants. Doctor Lynde sat at the lower end of the apartment, slightly apart

from the rest, with a woman closely veiled, evidently a stranger.

There was a perceptible commotion when Ward and Drusilla entered together. Lester clinched his hands, Ozelma looked up with an angry flash in her eyes, and Mrs. Merle after one startled glance, leaned back in her chair like one whose strength was spent.

The lawyer adjusted his spectacles, cleared his throat, and began to read.

The purport of the document is already known. Mrs. Severne had left the bulk of her immense worldly possessions to the "only son and heir of the late Douglas Thornton," as all those interested were fully aware before listening to the reading of the will. The instant the lawyer's voice died into silence, Ozelma rose, her beautiful face glowing with illy-concealed triumph.

"I call the attention of those present to the peculiar wording of the will," she said, in a clear, deep voice. "'Only son and heir of the late Douglas Thornton.' He sits yonder," pointing to Ward. "A cruel imposition has been practiced. The true heir of all this wealth is the young man you have known as Ward Templeton."

A moment's dead silence ensued. Every tongue was tied. Mrs. Merle rose up, trembling, but fell back again. She seemed cowed, utterly overwhelmed with surprise and terror. Had all her schemes come to naught at the very moment of success?

Lester was the first to recover the power of speech. He leaned forward, great drops of perspiration starting upon his brow.

"It is false!" he cried. "Ozelma loves this man, and has trumped up the incredible story to serve her own purpose. She is doubly a traitor; but she shall not deprive me of my birthright."

Ozelma repeated the word with a mocking sneer.

"Your birthright? What is it save shame and poverty? Ask the cowering woman who sits beside you. She is your mother. It was she who stole Douglas Thornton's son, when a helpless infant, and wickedly put her own child in his place."

"It is false!" Lester cried again.

"I can prove my assertion," Ozelma calmly said. "But it scarcely needs proof. Mrs. Merle's guilty looks, and your own evident terror, are sufficient evidence. Douglas Thornton and his wife are dead, and unable to corroborate my story. But Dr. Lynde is here. He attended Mrs. Thornton when Ward was born. He can give his opinion in regard to the matter."

The physician rose at once and said:

"I half suspected, at the time, that some fraud was being practiced. But there was no certainty, and I dared not speak. The substitution must have been made when the child was a week or ten days old. Mrs. Merle kept the rooms darkened. I remember, and allowed no one to enter. The child was reported as doing well, and kept out of my sight until I finally insisted upon seeing it. I was struck at once with its unfamiliar appearance."

"Why, this little one looks as though it might be six weeks or two months old," I exclaimed.

"It is very large and strong," Mrs. Merle replied.

"A fine, promising baby."

"Mrs. Thornton died a day or two later. I was not with her at the last, but I have brought with me Nancy Drame, a worthy woman, who was living in the house as servant at the time. She will tell you what occurred at the death-bed."

The woman sitting beside him threw back her veil.

"My mistress was very ill from the first," she said in a low, clear voice. "I saw her only once, when she was dying. At the last she called for her babe. Mrs. Merle tried to put her off, but she persisted. When the sleeping child was brought, she looked at it a moment, then pushed it suddenly from her."

"This is not my child," she cried in shrill accents. "What have you done with my innocent darling?"

"She died with the words upon her lips. Mrs. Merle said she was raving. But I had my doubts, even at the time. My master was away from home, in the wilds of the West, or-I might have spoken of them. When he returned, broken down with grief, I had half-forgotten my suspicions."

Dr. Lynde continued standing. "There is a test that ou ht to satisfy every doubt," he said. "The true heir had two crescent-shaped marks, like scars, just above the right elbow. I thought them very curious, and have never forgotten their peculiar appearance. They would always remain—"

"Here they are," Ward calmly interrupted, baring his arm.

Dr. Lynde bent to look. "The very same," he said instantly.

"If further proof is needed, I might repeat a conversation I overheard between Mrs. Merle and Lester," said Ozelma. "It was that which first opened my eyes to the truth. Ward's sudden appearance at Windymere had frightened and dismayed the woman, and the subject was freely discussed between them."

A cold, deadly despair had settled about the lines of Mrs. Merle's face. She got up feebly and with difficulty.

"I confess everything," she said, slowly. "The Thorntons were reputed wealthy at the time—I sinned for the sake of my son. I hoped his lot would be pleasanter than mine had been. I had Mrs. Thornton's child kept at a farm-house for some weeks, then took him to New York and gave him to Mrs. Templeton for her own. Yonder man," pointing to Ward, "is that child grown to manhood."

A sudden spasm went over her face. Turning to Ozelma, she added:

"You might better have remained true to the trust reposed in you. What advantage can you hope to reap in thus treacherously bringing the truth to light?"

Ozelma lifted her shoulders haughtily.

"Every advantage in the world, she said in a clear, ringing voice. "I am mistress of Windymere and have won him I love. Do not imagine I have suffered all this wealth to slip through my fingers. Ward Templeton Thornton, the admitted heir, is my husband!"

A hoarse, agonizing cry rung through the house. It came from Drusilla's lips. She started up, gazed at Ward fixedly a moment, and fell insensible at his feet.

CHAPTER XIX.

AFTER THE WEDDING.

THREE weeks have gone by since Mrs. Severne's death and burial.

Ward and Ozelma had quitted Windymere immediately, establishing themselves in the most elegant suite of apartments to be found among the palatial hotels of the great city. With unlimited wealth at command, why should they not enjoy the best of everything money can procure?

The sudden change was of Ozelma's suggesting. The stately old mansion in which her crabbed relative had lived and died was hateful to her. Whichever way she turned, that yellow old face, livid with horror and entreaty, as she had beheld it for a second's space in the dark, chill midnight, was rising before her mental vision. It gibbered at her from the darkest corners, and came stalking down the long halls and echoing corridors in the ghostly twilight.

She knew from experience what it is to be haunted by an unquiet spirit.

"We will go away," she had declared. "I should die of ennui in this windy old rookery. Nothing could induce me to make it a permanent home."

Ward had yielded submissively to her wishes. He was anything but a happy man. Now that it was forever too late, he realized the folly of the hasty step he had taken.

He could not help seeing that his beautiful bride

was selfish and unprincipled. After that brief interview with Drusilla, he had a misgiving that Ozelma had made use of falsehood and treachery to win him. No wonder he found very little happiness in the wealth and position to which he had attained.

And what of Drusilla? The hapless girl had stolen away from the house a few hours subsequent to the reading of the will. No one knew precisely when she went, or her intended destination.

Mrs. Merle and Lester were already gone. The farce in which they had borne so important a part was played out. They no longer had anything to hope or expect. After all these years of patient plotting and planning, they could only begin a new career in a different place.

The afternoon sun was shining into the superb apartment where Ozelma sat. Its ruddy light fell upon the rich hangings, beautiful pictures and costly trice-a-brac, deepening the vivid tints of the velvet reclining chair where she lay and intensifying her brilliant beauty until she looked fairly dazzling.

She wore a long robe of delicate gray velvet, and her wrists were banded with shining gold. Ozelma's tastes were all luxurious. Now that the opportunity to gratify them was hers, she reveled in silk, soft velvets and creamy laces, and the jewels in her casket would have purchased a prince's ransom.

Sitting thus, with the sunbeams kissing her crimson cheek, and playing in the dusky splendor of her hair, the low, white brow was gathered in a frown, and she impatiently tapped the carpet with one slipped foot.

"Nana," she said abruptly, addressing the French waiting-maid, "has my new dress been sent home from Madame Giraud's?"

"No, madame."

"How provoking! And I must have it to wear to the opera to-night."

"Madame has half a dozen superb costumes—"

"No matter. What is the use of money, if one is to dress like a dairy-maid? Send for the dress immediately."

"Yes, madame."

The maid did so. For some time after she returned, utter silence reigned in the boudoir. Suddenly Ozelma looked up, and spoke in her most imperious tone.

"Nana, where is my husband?"

"Lying on the couch in the dressing-room."

"Tell him to come here. I wish to speak with him."

The girl hesitated.

"I am sure monsieur is not well. He looks flushed and feverish, and has not been out to-day."

"Nonsense. Do as I bid you."

Nana departed, secretly thinking her beautiful mistress most cruel and unfeeling. To do Ozelma justice, she did not believe Ward was really ill. She had observed from the first that he shunned her society rather than courted it, and naturally resented this state of affairs.

"He is only shamming, in order to be rid of me," she said to herself, not too elegantly. "But I do not propose taking up the role of neglected wife."

When Ward entered, a few moments later, she addressed him without looking up.

"I am going to the opera to-night. It is Madame Fostori's benefit. Be prepared to escort me."

Ward took a step nearer, his face changing.

"My dear," he said in a tone of remonstrance, "it does not look well for you to go out so frequently. Poor Margaret Severne has not been dead a month—"

Ozelma interrupted him, stamping her foot.

"That horrid old woman! I shall not bury myself alive on her account. The ugly old witch! I always detested her."

"That is no reason why proper respect should not be shown her memory."

"I will not counterfeit what I do not feel. These opportunities for amusement and display are too

precious to be wasted. I must make up for all the wasted years before I came into this princely inheritance."

The young man sighed; but he made one last effort to influence her.

"I do not feel equal to the exertion, Ozelma. My head aches, and I have felt strangely all day. I fear I am going to be ill."

"Nonsense. Do not be fanciful, or trump up excuses. You will go if you really wish to please me. I sent for tickets early this morning."

Ward said no more. What would have been the use? He felt blind and dizzy, and his head throbbed with pain. He threw himself wearily upon the silken divan, but for some reason his thoughts dwelt more persistently than usual upon the beautiful, imperious woman who sat opposite.

She was his wife—but what did he know of her past? It was a sealed book to him. She never alluded to it except to deplore the wasted years of her early youth. He felt curious, and a trifle uneasy.

"Ozelma," he said, after a long silence, "we have never been confidential, as husband and wife usually are. I would like to hear you speak of your home and childhood, and the friends you knew before we met."

A cloud came over her beautiful face.

"It is not a pleasant topic," she said shortly. "I would like to forget those years of poverty and privation."

"Were you so very poor?"

She laughed—a hard, mirthless laugh, scarcely pleasant to hear.

"At beggary's door. I cannot endure even to think of it. We have taken each other for better or worse—let the past life of both be counted as nothing. I positively decline to discuss my own."

Thus repulsed, Ward said no more at the time; but her words came to him with double force afterward.

At the opera that night, Ozelma looked beautiful and stately as a queen. Her dress was of heavy white satin, with diamonds on her neck and arms, and braided in her midnight hair. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkled with conscious triumph. Every glass seemed directed to the box where she sat, and once or twice an audible murmur of admiration arose.

Ward sat silent and listless, his aching head resting against the wall. He was really worse, and the scene held no charm for him. The sensation his wife created annoyed him rather than otherwise.

Did a sweet, pure, girlish face rise between him and her glowing beauty? If so he bore his trouble well, making no sign.

Toward the close of the first act he became conscious of an excited stir in the parquette below. A man had just entered—a tall, brawny fellow, with the form of an athlete, but the appearance of a plain farmer. His eagle glance swept the house, resting finally upon the box where Ozelma sat. He stood up, pale and panting, an exultant cry breaking from his lips.

"At last!" he cried, aloud, in utter forgetfulness of his surroundings.

Ozelma saw and heard. Her beautiful face grew pallid as death, and she cowered behind the silken curtains, trembling in every limb.

"I am tired—ill!" she gasped, seizing hold of her husband's arm. "Take me home, Ward. At once!"

He never forgot the frightened, beautiful face as it looked at that moment. Every particle of color had been stricken from lip and cheek, and her eyes gazed into his, wild with entreaty and unnamed fear.

He never knew precisely how it happened, but on the way out they became separated from each other. Ozelma was borne along with the jostling crowd at that moment descending the stairs. While he stood hesitating and bewildered, a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder.

"Where is she—that false, beautiful devil?" hissed a voice in his ear.

He turned—it was the strange man who had watched them from below. Ward's thoughts were in a mist.

"It must be a case of mistaken identity," he gasped. "You surely do not know Ozelma?"

"Know her?" echoed the other with an oath. "The heartless coquette! She thought to cast me aside—be rid of me forever. But I have found her again, and there shall be a bitter reckoning."

The next instant he had darted on again, and was lost to sight.

Ward followed, sick, dizzy, faint, exhausted. The exciting scene had made him very ill. At last he was in the open air. Ozelma had disappeared. He stood there for some moments, watching and waiting. In vain. A gay, bustling crowd thronged the entrance, and he caught another glimpse of the stranger's powerful form, but his wife was nowhere to be seen.

Finally he called a carriage, and drove back to the hotel.

CHAPTER XX.

BITTER FRUIT.

OZELMA was there, in the midst of her tumbled fiery, satins, laces and, velvets littering the floor. The maid, Nana, pale with dismay, was rapidly gathering them into the open boxes that stood in the luxurious *boudoir*. Ozelma hurried forward with an eager cry of relief when she saw her husband.

"I was half-wild with impatience. You seemed an age in coming. Ward, I am tired of New York. Let us go away—at once. Anywhere—it does not matter. I can be ready in an hour's time."

She clung to him trembling, lifting her eyes in piteous entreaty. Where now was the brilliant, debonaire beauty that had half turned his head? This cowed, haggard, terrified woman seemed like another person.

"Who was that man," he sternly demanded, "that you should flee from him in such haste?"

"An enemy," she answered with a nervous shudder. "Such a terrible person! I am afraid of him, Ward. He swore he would kill me. He will do it too. For God's sake take me away before it is too late."

"I am here to protect you. He dare not harm my wife."

A sob of unutterable terror escaped her lips.

"You do not know him! He is bad, wicked, desperate. He would hesitate at nothing. I *must* go. It is the only way. Ward, if you love me, do not put so much as a straw in the way."

He said no more. It was not the time to ask for explanations. Her terror was real—nothing remained but to give way to it.

He sunk into one of the velvet chairs, cold, and burning at the same moment. All at once he experienced a peculiar sensation as though he was dying. The blinding gaslight, the flickering jewels, the sheen of silks and Ozelma's pallid, ghastly figure still in the snowy-satin costume she had worn at the opera, blended confusedly as in a mist.

Suddenly a startled cry broke from the lips of the maid:

"*Mon Dieu! Monsieur!*"

A casket of rubies dropped with a crash from Ozelma's trembling fingers. Ward had fallen back, livid and still. One glance, and the miserable woman flung herself shrieking before him.

"My God! He is dead! Bring a physician. Quick! Do not lose an instant."

The physician was soon in the room. He looked very grave as he bent over his motionless patient and examined him critically.

"Help my husband," Ozelma pleaded, as she stood trembling and cowering beside him. "It is a case of life or death. He must not be ill. For God's sake bring him out of this."

When Ward opened his eyes, presently, she clasped her arms passionately about his neck, and held him fast for a moment.

"Do not give way," she said in an agonizing whisper. "We are lost if you do. A terrible danger menaces us. We must fly—to-night. For God's sake rouse yourself."

She felt herself grasped from behind, and the doctor drew her roughly away.

"Hush, madam. You must be very careful. Your husband does not understand one word you say."

It was quite true. He was looking up at her—a wild, wandering gaze in which could be seen no sign of recognition. He spoke, but his words were only the meaningless babblings of delirium.

"Forgive me, Drusilla. I was cruel and unrelenting. I judged you too harshly. But I have been punished."

Ozelma's face blanched to a still more ghastly pallor. She stood a moment with both hands pressed hard against her temples, like one whose wits are gone. When she spoke it was in a strange, husky voice, wholly unlike her own.

"This is too dreadful! I dare not stay—but oh, how can I leave him?"

Then she began nervously gathering up the laces and jewels. Ever and anon a pitiful cry broke from her lips. She had sinned, but retribution was coming home to her swift and sure.

Suddenly the physician drew her toward the couch where Ward was now lying. The sick man's face was strangely changed. The pallor had gone—it was darkly flushed, and convulsed with pain.

The warm blood seemed to freeze in Ozelma's veins as she looked at him.

"I am frightened," she gasped. "Tell me the worst. What is it?"

"Your husband has been exposed to infection. He will be dangerously ill. It is a malignant fever."

The woman hid her face for a moment. There was a brief mental struggle. She loved Ward with all the ardor of which her selfish nature was capable. He was ill—perhaps dying—and she must fly from his side like a hunted criminal.

"It is to save my own life!" she cried in anguish.

"He would forgive me if he knew."

Then she caught hold of the shrinking maid, who had turned to fly.

"Nana, I leave him in your care. For God's sake, be true and faithful! Bring him out of this, and you shall be loaded with riches and benefits."

"Remain?" shrieked the frightened maid. "To take the fever? Madame must be beside herself. There is not gold enough in this cold, barbarous America to bribe me. I shall go with madame."

There was no help for it. She dared not linger. The cold apathy of utter despair crept over the miserable woman. Without another word she suffered Nana—now aroused to the exigencies of the situation—to fasten her wraps about her, and draw her out into the calm, starlit night.

A carriage was found, and they drove rapidly to the nearest railway station. Ozelma had formed no plans—her one only thought was to escape as quickly as possible from the place that held her relentless enemy.

A train was just being made up when they reached their destination. Ozelma hurried breathlessly along the crowded platform, clinging to the arm of her maid. Suddenly she paused, wildly flinging up her arms.

"Too late! He has followed me. There he is! Mercy! Oh, Nana, he will kill me."

The next instant, a tall, brawny figure struggled toward them. Nana caught a glimpse of a livid face and two burning eyes. A few husky words were hissed close to her ear.

"Ozelma, I warned you not to prove false to me. I cannot claim you living, but you shall be mine in death."

There was a loud, sharp report, followed instantly

by another. When the smoke cleared, and the paralyzed crowd recovered from their momentary consternation, they were found lying side by side—the beautiful false woman in her gleaming satin robe, all stained and gory with her heart's blood, and the handsome stranger who had loved her not wisely, but too well.

Both dead!

The facts of their history may be briefly told. Ozelma had met Ralph Granger in the quiet country town where she was teaching school. He was a fierce, headstrong, passionate man, but Ozelma had won his heart, betrothed herself to him, and the wedding-day been set.

While in a neighboring town, purchasing her *trousseau*, she had fallen in with Mrs. Merle. When the latter learned that the beautiful girl was Judith Severne's daughter, the two had laid between them the plot that was afterward carried out—though to a different result—than the ambitious woman had expected or desired.

Ozelma never returned to her waiting lover, but suddenly disappeared, leaving no clew by which she could be traced.

Ralph Granger gave himself up to the fell purpose of revenge. He sought his faithless love with all the dogged persistency of a sleuth-hound, and at last, at the very beginning of Ozelma's triumphant career, they had met!

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTER MANY DAYS.

WEEKS afterward, when Ward's fever had spent its force, he awoke to consciousness in a long, narrow room, white and sweet, and shining with cleanliness, though a score of cot-beds stood against the whitewashed wall in a line with his own.

His first feeling was one of extreme weakness. He could not even lift his hand to his head; it required too great an effort even to breathe. He lay motionless, with his eyes shut, simply because it required too great an effort to keep them open.

Suddenly some one approached the bed and stooped over it. He felt the presence without seeing who it was. A low sigh stirred the air, and a tender, trembling kiss was pressed upon his lips.

Even then he did not look up. A dreamy sense of contentment and peace was upon him. Protracted illness had rendered his thoughts sluggish; he would not stir lest the subtle charm be broken.

Presently a heavier step sounded near, and he heard a cheery voice—evidently the doctor's.

"How do you find your patient this morning?"

"Better, I think. He has slept quietly the whole night, and I am sure the fever has abated."

Did he dream—or was it Drusilla's voice? The soft, low tones thrilled him through and through.

"Should he live, he will owe his recovery to you, Miss Dreeme," said the doctor. "Never had patient a more devoted nurse. When he was brought here, I set his down as a hopeless case."

"He has no friends," said Drusilla in a low voice. "He was like—like—a brother to me once. I felt like doing what I could for him."

"You have scarcely eaten or slept. There would be few fatal cases if all the attendants were like you."

The doctor passed on. Then the sick man seemed to lose himself for a while. The next thing he remembered those fragrant lips were again touching his, and a tremulous voice whispered:

"If it be thy will, spare him, good Lord."

This time Ward opened his eyes, and made a futile attempt to raise his arms.

"Drusilla!" he faintly uttered.

She was startled, and looked ready to faint. But, after a moment she recovered herself.

"I am glad you are so much better," she said hastily. "You have been very ill. Do not talk, please. It will hurt you. Try to sleep."

He looked at her with a long, wondering gaze that was growing more intelligent every moment.

"Give me your hand," he said suddenly.

"Why?"

"Then I shall know for a certainty you are here. Now it seems like a dream."

She laid it in his. Even in his weakness he could feel that it trembled.

"Now I shall be able to sleep," he said.

And he did. Drusilla watched him, grateful tears falling down her pale cheeks. He was thin, worn, haggard, the shadow of his former self; but for the first time her heart throbbed rapidly with hope.

After a long interval, she attempted to withdraw her hand from his clasp. He seemed to know instantly, and starting, looked up at her.

"You must be tired, Drusilla," he said, releasing her. "Promise you will not go away, and I shall be content."

She hesitated. "Promise," he repeated, more earnestly.

"I will not go to-day."

A pleased smile broke over his face—he was like a little child. "You are very kind," he murmured.

So he passed from waking to sleeping, and sleeping to waking again. The day faded. With every waning hour he seemed to gather strength.

The next morning, as Drusilla and the doctor both stood beside the couch Ward heard the former say in a subdued whisper:

"You think he is out of danger—that he will live?"

"Yes. The fever has left him. It has been a hard struggle, but we have cheated the grave of its victim this time."

"Thank God."

Later, Drusilla sat for a long time beside the couch. Ward lay with his eyes wide open, watching her. He found a deep peace and satisfaction in her presence. Several times he attempted to speak, but she would not listen.

"You are too weak to converse. I shall go away if you even attempt it."

"Then I will be silent. I wish to keep you here as long as possible."

Drusilla tried to be calm, but she trembled under his gaze. The memory of the past—the old days when they first learned the lesson of love—was strong upon her. She was thinking, too, of the future, of an ordeal that must be met at once.

The next time Ward awakened, that pale, sweet face had vanished—it was the good doctor who sat watching beside the bed.

"Where am I?" Ward asked, after a moment's delay.

"In the hospital. You were taken ill at one of the hotels, and brought here."

"How long since?"

"Nearly a month."

"I have been ill of an infectious disease?"

"Yes."

He drew a deep breath. There was a choking sensation in his throat.

"Miss Dreeme has been with me much of the time, risking contagion for my sake?"

"Yes." The good doctor could contain himself no longer. "That woman is an angel," he cried.

"God bless her sweet face. She never seemed to think of herself, or feel a moment's weariness. I never witnessed such patient, unwearied devotion."

Ward's face flushed.

"Where is she now?" he asked.

"Gone. She could only remain while the danger lasted, she said. She left the hospital an hour ago."

"She may take the disease, and die of it."

"She has promised to send for me if she is ill. She will keep her word."

"How did she know of my illness?"

"Read a paragraph in one of the daily papers, I believe."

Ward lay silent and thoughtful. In a dreamy way he could recall everything that had transpired. His mind was a prey to conflicting emotions.

"Where is she—my wife?" at length he abruptly asked.

The doctor arose with a changed face.

"You have talked enough for the present," he said shortly. "I will tell you more when you are stronger."

The day came when Ward learned of Ozelma's tragic death and all the facts connected with it. He was not greatly surprised. He remembered the look on the stranger's face, that night at the opera. Murder seemed but the fitting outcome.

Health and strength slowly returned. Upon leaving the hospital, Ward searched everywhere for Drusilla. A futile quest. She had vanished from his life as utterly as though their paths had never touched. He only saw her in his dreams and waking thoughts.

Twelve months later, Ward was passing along one of the avenues in Washington when a friend warmly grasped his hand.

"You must come with me this evening to Mrs. Hayden's reception, Thornton. Something unique in the way of entertainment. I have pledged my word to bring you."

A look of languid indifference settled upon the young man's face. He had got over the first surprise of finding himself constantly in demand. The heir of Mrs. Severne's millions made acquaintances without any effort, and found a ready *entree* to any circle he cared to join.

"What is the attraction?" he inquired.

"A musical prodigy Mrs. Hayden is bringing out. I have forgotten the name. But she has a voice like a nightingale. You will be repaid for the trouble of going, I assure you."

Ward went. He had nothing else to do. It was easier than framing an excuse to remain away.

The spacious parlors were filled to suffocation. The programme was lengthy. There were tableaux, readings from Shakespeare, and charades. Ward sat sweltering in the hot-house atmosphere until the attraction of the evening appeared—then he forgot all discomfort, and remained motionless, like one in a dream, his eyes fixed intently upon the singer.

It was Drusilla. How well he remembered that pure, sweet face, with its drooping eyes and tempting lips! Never had he heard music half so entrancing as the clear, liquid notes that filled the spacious apartments with melody.

"Her success is assured," said a voice at his elbow as Drusilla retired in the midst of a deafening storm of applause. "She will make a sensation when she goes on the stage."

Ward made no reply. He felt bewildered. The surprise of finding Drusilla under such circumstances, developing a talent he did not know she possessed, fairly took his breath away.

He arose, as soon as escape was possible, and made his way into one of the ante-rooms. Drusilla was there, investing herself with her wraps. She turned at the sound of an approaching step. Her lips flew apart in a sudden cry, and she fell against the wall.

The next instant Ward's arms were round her—he was holding her close, tears that were no shame to his manhood falling upon her upturned face.

"Why did you run away from me, Drusilla? I have missed you so—life has been very lonely. I have something to forgive—you a great deal. Is it not to be peace between us?"

No need to record her answer. Purified by suffering, she was well fitted for the happiness and prosperity that had fallen to her portion.